

**Recipient(s):** Faculty Management Team, Arts

## Faculty of Arts – handling the press effectively in connection with crises

Based on its experience of previous issues at Aarhus University, the Senior Management Team has decided that each faculty should draw up a plan for handling the press effectively when crises arise.

This document describes the way in which the management should handle the press, focusing on the aspects of management associated with identifying and handling the way the world around us perceives crises at AU. In other words, the document describes the role of the management when crises occur.

We also refer to the process description in issues involving the harassment of staff by external parties, the website relating to harassment by students and colleagues, the website on the working environment, and other sources.

The process description is designed for the line management and is not a tool for use by staff.

### What is a crisis?

In our definition, a crisis is a situation or event which has already attracted the attention of the general public (or which will probably attract their attention), and which may have negative implications for the reputation of the faculty and thereby the university. In other words, we include potential crises as well as crises that have already arisen; and it is important to focus not only on tackling reputational crises, but also on identifying situations that might potentially attract the media spotlight.

Public interest can take the form of posts in social media, press coverage, requests for access to documents and other similar situations.

Issues in which AU staff are exposed to harassment and threats are not covered by this process description, and nor does it cover the rules and procedures relating to access to documents. Please see the appendix regarding access to documents.

Crises and potential crises in the university sector can arise in a variety of areas:



- *Core activities: research, education or knowledge sharing*  
For instance when issues arise in connection with research results, impartiality or the credibility of degree programmes; when teaching methods or research methods are criticised; or when complaints are made about sexist behaviour.
- *Administrative issues, including HR issues*  
We may be to blame for these ourselves (if we fail to comply with regulations); but they may also originate elsewhere (when people are dissatisfied with decisions or procedures, or raise doubts about them). For instance, crises arising owing to decisions relating to degree programmes or staff dismissals.
- *Internal or external conflicts*  
Conflicts arising outside the university (for instance disagreements relating to research or collaboration difficulties) may develop and turn into crises.

### **Who should raise the alarm about a crisis or potential crisis, and who should be informed?**

All members of staff – including local managers in particular – must inform their line manager if they become aware of a crisis that has arisen or a situation that may cause a crisis.

It is often difficult to identify a crisis if you are involved in the situation concerned yourself, so your colleagues and managers also have a duty to draw attention to any potential crises.

Line managers should inform the head of school, who will discuss the situation with the communication staff and chief adviser and decide whether the procedure for handling crises outlined below should be implemented.

The dean will decide whether the Rector's Office and the university's Communication and Press Office should be informed.

### **A typology of crises**

When assessing the extent or potential of a crisis, it is necessary to assess its typology and its potential for increasing in size. Different types of crisis are defined in different ways, and their size is also difficult to define precisely.

Here are some of the factors involved in assessing a crisis: the degree of current or potential media interest, whether the group involved is closed or open, the financial dimensions of the crisis, the nature of the people who might be interested in it, whether or not a matter of principle is at stake, whether the crisis might spill over into other areas, and the extent to which the university's core functions are involved.

## Taskforce for handling major crises

A taskforce should be set up to handle the reputational or media-related consequences of existing or potential crises, the aim being to shed light on the issue from all relevant communicative angles. The members of this taskforce do not necessarily need the competences to handle the specific issues involved. These issues will be handled by the relevant managers.

The work done by the taskforce should be characterised by agility and speed, so it is important that its members can give high priority to taskforce activities.

The members of the taskforce should have the following competences:

- *A management representative*  
This representative must be at a level of management enabling them to engage in ongoing dialogue with the dean (a head of school, for instance). The management representative is responsible for initiating and ensuring internal co-ordination.
- *Academic competences*  
The taskforce may need one or more employees/managers who have the insight into the subject area required to assess the issue at stake. However, in general the person concerned should not be involved directly in this issue.
- *Legal competences*  
Depending on the nature of the crisis, a variety of legal competences may be required: educational, administrative, general or HR competences.
- *Political competences* – for instance the chief adviser.
- *Press/communication competences* – for instance the Head of Communications.

The members of the taskforce may be able to offer several competences each, and specialists and experts can also be included as ad hoc members of the taskforce.

It may also be agreed that the taskforce should be supplemented by staff from the Rector's Office, including the Chief Legal Counsel and the Head of Press Affairs, or legal specialists from various administrative divisions.

While the issue is being processed, the Rector's Office will be available as sparring partners and advisers in administrative, legal and data-protection issues.

## Process plan

1) Identify the crisis/potential crisis	Inform the relevant parties Decide where responsibility lies
2) Define and assess the crisis	Identify the actual issues involved (cards on the table) Conduct an initial risk assessment and SWOT analysis, and identify stakeholders

3) Set up a taskforce	<p>The members of this taskforce should be selected depending on the nature of the crisis</p> <p>Speed and agility are important</p>
4) Identify the tasks to be done by the taskforce	<p>Expand the risk assessment and stakeholder analysis, making sure you include both internal and external stakeholders</p>
4.a. Timetable	<p>Draw up a timetable for handling the press</p>
4.b. Draw up a plan for dealing with the issues at stake	<p>It is vital to underline that a crisis does not only involve aspects of communication. There are also specific issues which must be handled/resolved just as professionally as the communicative aspects. Depending on the situation, the degree to which the taskforce is involved in the actual issues will vary. The chair of the taskforce is responsible for coordination.</p>
4.c. Communication	<p>Draw up a plan for communication</p> <p>Appoint spokesperson(s) and prepare them for the task</p> <p>The manager is in a difficult position, needing to strike a balance between being a good manager for the members of staff involved and being the university's representative in terms of external communication.</p> <p>Assess the sense of urgency: what is urgent, and how urgent is it?</p> <p>Core messages: silence is sometimes golden</p> <p>Choose your media carefully if you want to go on the offensive</p> <p>Tone of voice: maintain your dignity, treat the press with respect (no matter what happens), and refrain from seeming arrogant</p> <p><u>External communication</u></p> <p>Timing of publication; focus on sufficient preparation to meet the press</p> <p>Decide how much information you need to withhold, and try to understand the media: It's the cover up – not only the issue at stake – that creates a crisis.</p> <p>Remember that you can always buy time when you are approached by journalists: "I'm heading off for a meeting, can I call you back in a couple of hours?"</p>

*Internal communication*

In crisis situations the focus is often placed on handling the general public's interest in the issues involved and how they are dealt with.

But don't forget the importance of internal communication to employees and the rest of the organisation – some members of staff are involved directly in the issue, and everyone can see that their workplace is under external pressure.

Remember that employees in your own unit and elsewhere in the organisation also get their information from the external media.

**Appendix:** Handling requests for access to documents; Senior Management Team