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A structured Delphi approach to Assessment and Identification of barriers in Vertical Communication in Indian Higher Education Sector

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Abstract:

Effective and efficient communication is a back-bone of success for any organization. Especially the success and growth in higher education system is mostly based on the success of teamwork and communication. Based on the literature gap, this research attempted to understand and identify the barriers to vertical communication in higher education institutes. This research used a well proven and tested Delphi approach to narrow-down the identified barriers. The findings of this research revealed 10 critical barriers to vertical communication in higher educational institutes. The findings of this study are extremely useful to researchers and policy makers in creating a model linking these barriers and identify the relative importance in their own context. This study provides a systematic and validated approach to identification of barriers to vertical communication in higher educational institutes.

Keywords: Delphi, communication, higher educational institutes

Introduction

Effective communication is becoming increasingly important in today's globalized and knowledge-based economy, where organizations, including educational institutions, must collaborate and compete on a global scale. In the field of education, effective communication is essential for the delivery of high-quality teaching, learning and research, as well as for building positive relationships with stakeholders (Salamondra.T, 2021) such as students, parents, faculty, and community members.

Indian higher education institutes follow a hierarchical structure, where mostly, the decision-making power lies with the top management (Dar, 2019). This often results in a lack of autonomy and creativity at the lower levels, as decisions are imposed from the top. Communication within Indian Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) usually results a gap between upper management and lower-tier staff members in the organizational hierarchy. One of the prominent reasons behind this is the language barrier. Many HEIs employ English as their primary language of instruction and communication, wherein participants like staff and students who are not fluent in the language may find it difficult to communicate (Quick. E, 2024). This can result in misunderstandings, poor implementation of policies, and resistance to changes.

Effective communication is critical for any organization, including higher education institutions. Improved and effective vertical communication, generally refers to

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communication that occurs between different levels of an organization that can bring many potential benefits. Some of the benefits are presented in Figure 1.0

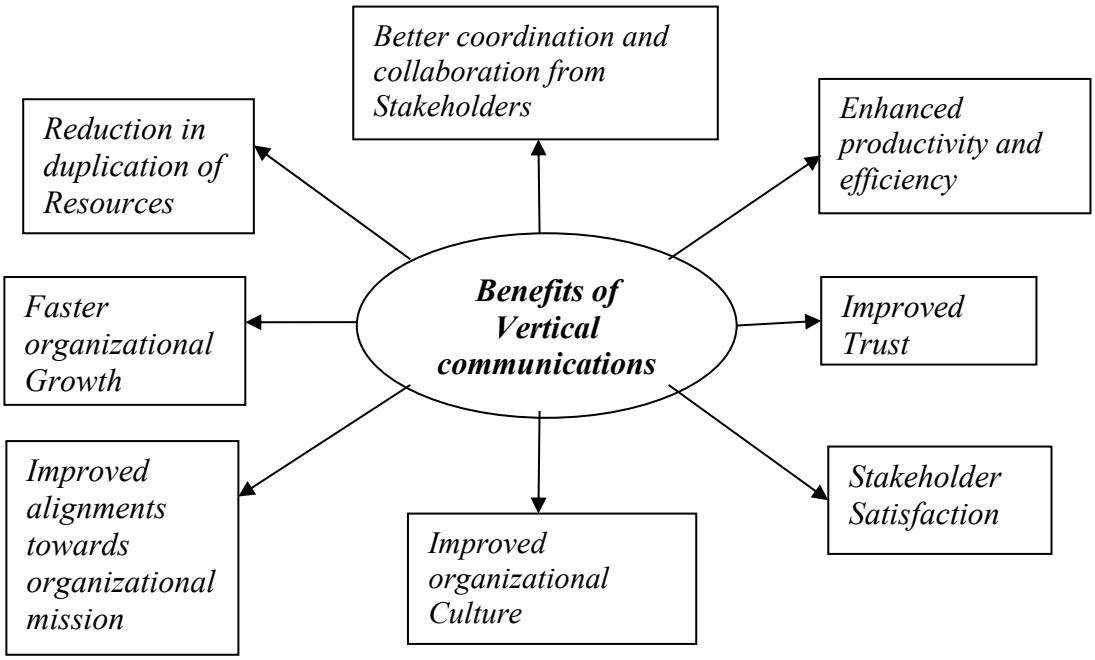


Figure 1:- Select benefits of Vertical communication

By communicating regularly and transparently with stakeholders, including students, parents, and the broader community, higher education institutions can demonstrate their commitment to excellence and to serving the needs of their constituents.

While numerous researchers have demonstrated that effective and efficient vertical communication on one side can lead to institutional growth, enhanced reputation, more visibility, employee satisfaction (Postmes, 2001) etc, on the other side barriers to effective communications has a strong potential to be controlled and monitored. It is seen that no comprehensive study is seen on identification and exploring the barriers of vertical communication in higher education sector in India and hence this study is an attempt to explore and identify the barriers to vertical communication especially in the context of Higher Education system India.

Significance of the study

While effective vertical communication can bring numerous benefits to higher education institutions, there are potential barriers that can hinder communication and collaboration. These barriers include *power imbalances, cultural differences*, *perception of autocratic style etc* that

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can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication, and technological limitations that can make it difficult to communicate across different levels of the organization.

Effectively measuring and monitoring the underlying drivers and barriers is critical to developing strategies that incorporate inclusive communication practices and deploy suitable technologies to enable seamless collaboration across institutional hierarchies.The study of the role of vertical communication in higher education institutions is significant for a number of reasons. Some of them are presented in Table 1

- *Communication is critical for the success of any organization, and higher education institutions are no exception.*
- *Understanding how vertical communication functions within these institutions is crucial for improving their overall performance and enhancing student outcomes.*
- *Higher education institutions are undergoing rapid growth and change, and the effectiveness of their vertical communication channels and strategies may need to be re-evaluated considering these changes.*
- *This institutional flux is compounded by broader state-level economic and social developments, alongside substantial shifts in educational funding allocations.*
- *The allocation of fund for education is also sizably changed.*
- *The increased focus of Higher education institutions to bank on quality and attract multinational, multicultural, multi linguistic students and faculty.*
- *It is vital to explore how vertical communication functions differ across varied disciplines (e.g., English, Humanities, Management, and Statistics) to gain a comprehensive, nuanced understanding of its role in diverse academic settings.*

Table 1: Role of Vertical communication :- select reasons

A comprehensive study of vertical communication practised in these institutions will go a long way in providing valuable insights into their current state, as well as identifying areas for improvement.

Literature Review

The quality of communication influences the quality of employee performance at different organizational levels (Yuelan & Jing, 2018). Such an influence occurs due to the following fundamental factors: on the one hand, leadership communication and, on the other hand, the communication strategies oriented to good employee relations (Chen, X., & Wei, S. 2020). Hence, the organizational behaviour must be directed by communication strategies that contribute to creating a better work environment, thereby guaranteeing the highest performance of workers (Simiyu, V. N. 2017)

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Communication plays a significant role in organizational success by enabling the sharing of ideas, building strong relationships, and creating a conducive work environment (Weick, 1987). A healthy communication system promotes transparency and accountability. When communication is open and transparent, it is easier to identify and address problems and issues (Kim & Na, 2016). An institution of higher education needs to stand out from the competition through its positive image and reputation based on quality internal communication, else it cannot boast about its successful results. Tench and Yeomans state that "the strategic purpose of internal communication can perhaps be best summarised as one that is concerned with building two-way, trusting relationships with internal publics, with the goal of improving organisational effectiveness. Better informed employees will be better motivated, thus contributing to increased productivity" (Tench and Yeomans, 2009). Dar (2019) identified different forms of communication they are presented in Table 2:

Table 2: Different types of communication (adopted from Dar (2019)

Top-down communication	It is the flow of information from the top-level management to the lower-level management in the hierarchy. For example, the university Vice-Chancellor may communicate with department chairs to provide them with the vision, mission, and goals of the institution.
Bottom-up communication:	It is the flow of information from the lower-level management to the top-level management. For example, faculty members may communicate with their department heads to report on teaching or research progress, or to provide feedback on academic policies.
Lateral communication	This refers to the flow of information between individuals at the same level of management hierarchy. For example, faculty members may communicate with each other to share best practices or to collaborate on research projects.
Formal communication	This refers to communication that is planned and organized through official channels. For example, the university may hold regular meetings with department heads to discuss academic policies or provide updates on administrative matters.
Informal communication	This refers to communication that is spontaneous and unplanned, often taking place outside the formal channels. For example, faculty members may communicate with each other in the hallway or during lunch breaks to discuss teaching techniques or research ideas.
Written communication	This refers to communication that is conveyed through written materials, such as memos, reports, or emails. For example, the university may send out a memo to all faculty members to announce a new academic policy or to provide updates on a construction project.

While the review of literature is essential, It clearly presents the gap, that studies identifying the barriers to vertical communication in HEI are not seen. In this light this paper is attempted to address following key objectives: a) understand the significance of barriers to vertical communication and b) Identify the barriers to vertical communication in select settings.

Research Methodology

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The methodology for understanding and identifying the barriers to vertical communication is presented in Figure 2

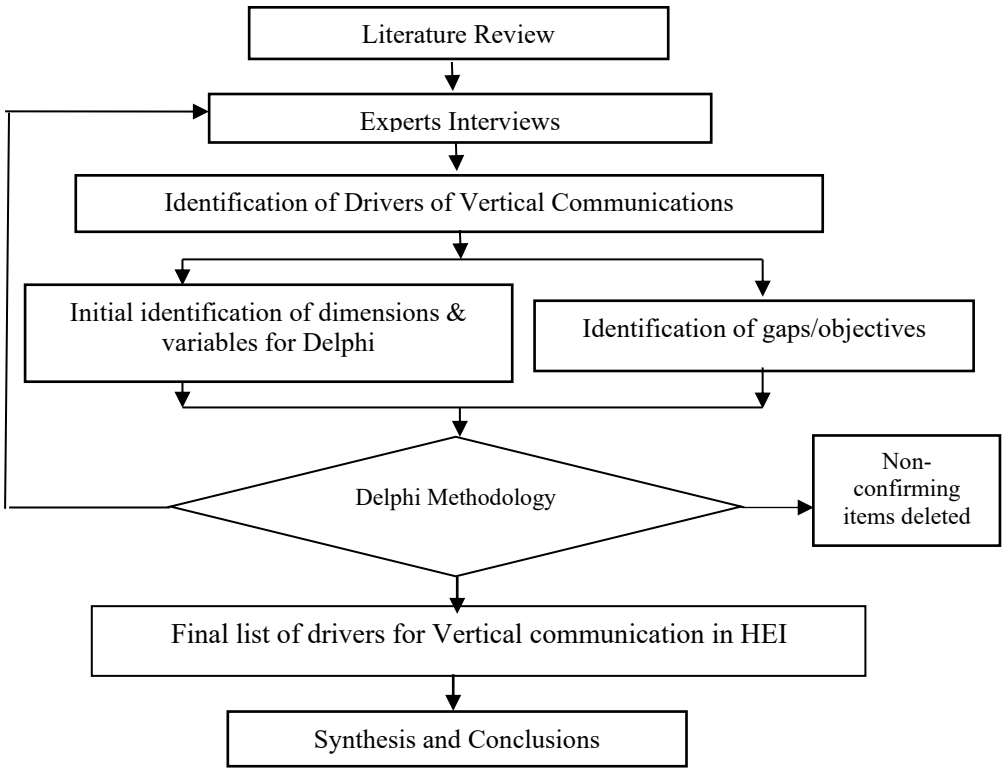


Figure 2 select representation of Research Methodology adopted in presnet research

Panel of experts

A panel of experts was selected to identify the barriers hindering vertical communication in Indian higher education institutions in NCR. The selection of experts for the panel was designed to incorporate a diversity of opinions without introducing the potential for bias from experts having a stake in the outcome of the study. The panels of experts who participated in the study were, as much as possible, neutral in the sense of not representing any faction or a hierarchy of the vertical communication channel. Experts were chosen to ensure a balance of viewpoints. To this end, experts from variety of higher educational institutions, for example, engineering, science, arts and commerce were chosen. The experts were selected on a convenience basis having several years of experience in the education sector especially higher

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education. Finally, a panel of 15 experts were formulated for the study. The demographic profile of the participants of the expert interviews is tabulated in Table 3

Table 3: Demographic profile description of the experts

Demographic Profile Parameter	***Description of the demographic profile of the experts***
Qualification	Minimum graduate qualification till PhD holders with additional technical qualifications in the respective fields. This was done to incorporate diversity in the panel and obtain honest opinions from different tiers.
Number of people	Total fifteen members having wide experience in academia and industry.
Experience	Minimum of five years of experience in the institution playing active role in either academic or non-academic role. These have wide experience in the area as they handle communication with different stakeholders in the organisation
Level in the institution	Teachers to Deans, some assistant and deputy registrars and other members of the non-academic field, exam officers, admin staff and academic coordinators.

The graphical representations of the demographic profiles of the experts on the basis of designation and field of specialization is presented in the Figure 3.

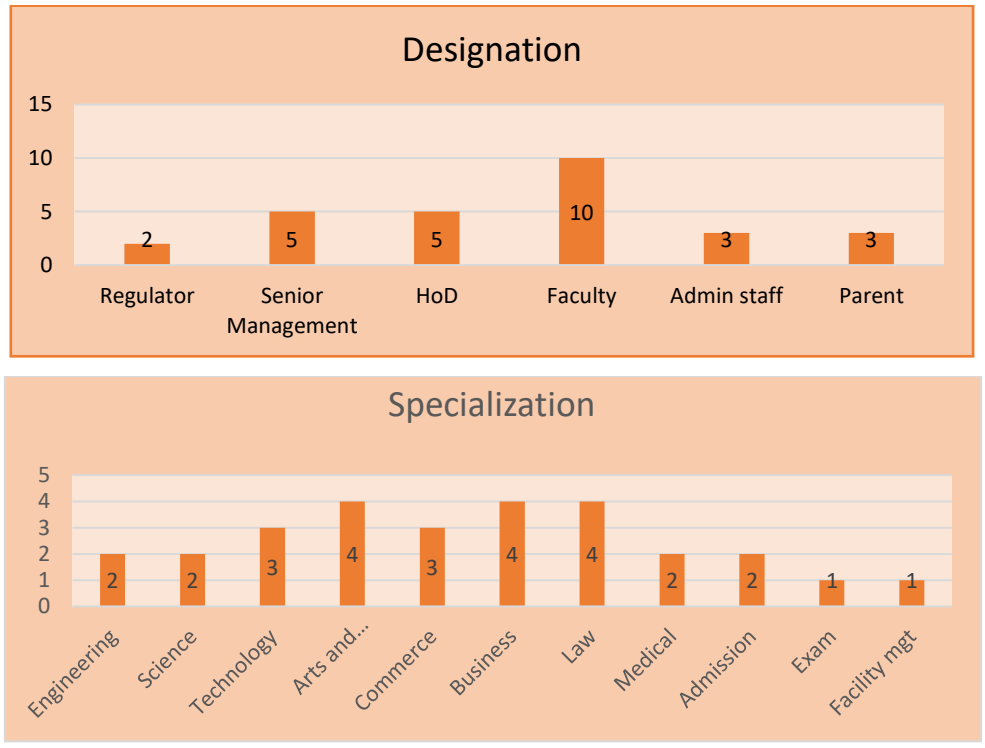


Figure 3: Demographic profile of experts: A schematic representation

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The Delphi rounds conducted with the experts to identify and reduce the number of barriers in accordance with the context of the study. Table 4 presents the compilation of composite scores obtained on different barriers.

Table 4: Composite scores given by experts on barriers hindering communication

Name of Barrier	**Outcome 1**			**Outcome 2**			**Outcome 3**			**Outcome 4**			*Count*
	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	
Distortion of facts within the hierarchy	10	4	1	9	1	5	6	8	1	9	5	1	*34*
Omission of facts within the hierarchy	5	9	1	4	1	10	5	1	9	7	1	7	*21*
Overload of information at one tier within the hierarchy	8	1	6	10	4	1	9	1	5	6	1	8	*33*
Lack of synchronisation among different activities within the hierarchy	2	1	12	4	1	10	5	1	9	1	9	5	*12*
Failure to respond to information or problems by line managers	4	1	10	3	1	11	6	1	8	1	6	8	*14*
Defensive attitude by line managers towards less perfect actions	10	4	1	12	1	2	6	1	8	7	1	7	*35*
Physical distance between members within the hierarchy	9	5	1	9	5	1	8	6	1	7	1	7	*33*
Different conceptions about information and problems by different members within the hierarchy	3	1	11	5	1	9	6	1	8	7	1	7	*21*
Insufficient experience of line managers towards handling problems and information	11	2	1	11	2	1	9	5	1	8	6	1	*39*
Difference in habits, traditions and presence of bias	5	1	9	6	1	8	7	1	7	7	7	1	*25*
Presence of politics within the hierarchy	5	1	9	1	7	7	3	1	11	7	7	1	*16*
Linguistic obstacles at one tier within the hierarchy	7	1	7	5	9	1	4	4	7	1	8	6	*17*
Lack of importance given by line managers to vertical communication	10	4	1	9	5	1	11	3	1	8	6	1	*38*
Lack of systematic channels of communication	5	1	9	6	1	8	7	1	7	7	7	1	*25*
Complexity of language in communication	11	2	1	11	2	1	9	5	1	8	6	1	*39*
Time pressure to respond to communication	9	5	1	9	5	1	8	6	1	7	1	7	*33*
Prejudice among members of the hierarchy	5	1	9	6	1	8	7	1	7	7	7	1	*25*
Emotional state of the decision maker in the hierarchy	10	4	1	9	1	5	6	8	1	9	5	1	*34*

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Name of Barrier	Outcome 1			Outcome 2			Outcome 3			Outcome 4			*Count*
	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	3	2	1	
Distraction caused by environmental factors	7	1	7	5	9	1	4	4	7	1	8	6	*17*
Members lower in the hierarchy are discouraged to give honest opinions	10	4	1	9	1	5	6	8	1	9	5	1	*34*

Based on the scores obtained after the analysis of the responses given by the experts, following ten barriers are identified as key barriers to the vertical communication in Higher Education institutes in India. These are the barriers which hinder vertical communication in higher education institutions in India. These barriers are as follows:

a) *Distortion of facts regarding the information within the hierarchy*
b) *Overload of information at one tier within the hierarchy*
c) *Defensive attitude by line managers towards less perfect actions*
d) *Physical distance between members within the hierarchy*
e) *Insufficient experience of line managers towards handling problems and information*
f) *Lack of importance given by line managers to vertical communication*
g) *Complexity of language in communication*
h) *Time pressure to respond to communication*
i) *Emotional state of the decision maker in the hierarchy*
j) *Members lower in the hierarchy are discouraged to give honest opinions*

Interpretation and relevance of barriers in the context of HEI

An attempt is made further to understand and explain these barriers in the context of Higher Education system in India. These are:

1) Distortion of facts regarding the information within the hierarchy

When the message has suffered an alteration along the way, due to differences between sender and recipient, information and facts are distorted. The alteration often changes the meaning of the message resulting in loss of information. Cognitive and perceptual differences between sender and receiver, including variations in language proficiency, cultural background, and interpretive frameworks. Semantic barriers, where ambiguous terminology or jargon leads to misinterpretation. Selective perception and filtering, where individuals unconsciously or deliberately omit, modify, or emphasize certain details based on their own biases, interests, or political motives. Lack of communication

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competence, including insufficient training in effective message construction and decoding.

The distortion of facts may occur both up and in downward flow of information and often results in opening of unofficial channels of communication.

2) Overload of information at one tier within the hierarchy

Information overload occurs when the volume, complexity, or rate of incoming information exceeds the processing capacity of an individual, team, or specific hierarchical tier within an organization. In such instances, the affected tier functions as a structural bottleneck, impeding the otherwise smooth vertical flow of information between upper and lower echelons.

As a result, critical messages are delayed, deprioritized, filtered, or entirely lost before reaching their intended stakeholders. The breakdown is rarely intentional; rather, it stems from cognitive limitations, inadequate infrastructure, or inefficient workflow design that prevents the tier from effectively processing and disseminating information. This dysfunction triggers several organizational consequences like Circumvention of formal channels, wherein subordinates or external parties bypass the overloaded tier to transmit information directly to higher or lower levels. Emergence of informal communication networks (grapevine), which may propagate unverified or inaccurate information. Significant delays in decision-making, policy implementation, and response times and Increased employee frustration and reduced trust in formal communication systems.

3) Defensive attitude by managers towards less perfect actions

Staff members also tend to withhold information when certain members of the hierarchy tend to defend their less perfect actions or mediocre attitude towards problems shared by them. Certain members also tend to get defensive over their wrong decision making or to hide other mistakes committed by them. When confronted the members portray such an attitude which deters initiatives for communication among members in the hierarchy.

4) Physical distance between members within the hierarchy

Separating an administrator from his/her staff members creates differences among them. Often times, lack of open-door policy or fewer means of communication with the members up in the hierarchy results in creation of distances. It results in

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misunderstanding, hesitancy towards minimising the gap through frequent visits and hence hinders communication resulting in common problems.

5) Insufficient experience of managers towards handling problems and information

Members may possess lack of training regarding handling of communication from upward and downward directions. This results in hesitancy in providing information as they are hesitant towards its correctness. The members often tend to waste time in understanding correct method of responding to the communication or putting forth the communication.

6) Lack of importance given by managers to vertical communication

Influenced by long-standing hierarchical system, certain members in the top of the hierarchy have infiltrated authoritarianism into management of the institution. They will involuntarily take a condescending attitude, order employees to unconditionally implement their measures, ignore employees' emotional changes and thoughts and emotions, and output signals unilaterally. Also, the subordinates are afraid to ask questions, which leads to poor internal communications.

7) Complexity of language in communication

The written modes of communication in the institution may involve complex language, jargons and terminologies which may cause difficulty in understanding to different members within the hierarchy.

8) Time pressure to respond to communication

These represents the response or communication in the restricted time. Time is potentially bound to the effectiveness of communication, especially the deadlines are those that often undermine the quality of information and ultimately becomes a barrier.

9) Emotional state of the decision maker in the hierarchy

Because of the different situations that a worker can face in an organization during his work, he can be influenced by his own state of mind, which in turn seems a factor that can potentially impact as an obstacle to the effectiveness of communication

10) Members lower in the hierarchy discouraged to give honest opinions

The members lower in the hierarchy might face pressure to communicate in a certain way hindering honest opinions from them. This is owing to lack of knowledge, their hierarchical situation and financial constraints.

Concluding Remarks

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The present study aimed at identifying and analysing the barriers that hinder vertical communication in higher educational institutions of India. It further aimed at prioritising solutions for successfully mitigating these barriers. As communication in general and vertical communication in particular plays an important role in enhancing productivity of employees and in turn their performance, it is important to identify and mitigate the barriers that hinder it. Despite its importance, the extant literature presents limited evidence towards developing a structured method for its understanding and identification. Future researchers may attempt development of structured linkages that explain the leads to relationship between them and constructing a prioritisation framework for the mitigation of barriers.

As vertical communication creates and maintains positive work environment, contributively mind-set, competitive outlook, and mutual respect and understanding among the various stakeholders, its role in enhancing the workforce performance is of immense importance. However, in context of higher education institutions, vertical communication is hindered by several contextual barriers. Limited studies have been performed towards identification of these barriers especially in the context of Indian higher education institutions. Studies developing structured linkages explaining the leads to relationship between these barriers for Indian higher education institutions have also given limited attention. Furthermore, limited studies have attempted to develop a prioritisation framework of solutions that help in mitigating the identified barriers. Amidst this backdrop, the present study attempted to fulfil the identified research gaps for the Indian higher education institutions.

The study provides insights into the barriers to effective communication and thus the understanding has a strong potential to identify solutions for their mitigation. The prioritized solutions can be used to develop interventions to improve vertical communication in higher education institutions in India. These interventions can help to improve communication effectiveness, foster a culture of open communication, and ultimately improve the quality of education provided by these institutions.

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