

Textual Analysis of Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention: A Sensemaking Perspective

Somayeh Taromi-nejad-shirazi, PhD Candidate, Kent Business School
st679@kent.ac.uk

Prof. M. May Seitanidi, Reader in Strategy, University of East London
m.seitanidi@uel.ac.uk

Dr. Krystin Zigan, Senior Lecturer, University of Applied Sciences Zwickau, Germany
krystin.zigan@fh-zwickau.de

Abstract

Universities are pivotal in addressing student mental health and suicide prevention strategies. However, effective implementation often suffers from unclear communication to stakeholders. This developmental paper explores how universities in England employ communicative actions to facilitate stakeholder sensemaking around student mental health and suicide prevention implementation. Using organisational sensemaking and sensegiving as theoretical lenses, this research investigates publicly available university documents, identifying how suicide prevention cues are communicated to internal stakeholders. This study contributes to organisational sensemaking literature by highlighting how ongoing communication shapes stakeholders' understanding and involvement with preventive strategies.

Word count: 2400

Introduction:

In recent years, mental health has become a critical societal issue, with growing awareness of its impact across various sectors (WHO, 2021). Universities, which serve as communities for young adults during key developmental years, have witnessed increasing mental health challenges among their students (Auerbach *et al.*, 2018; Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Smith, 2021). One of the most serious and urgent concerns in this area is suicide prevention, which has become a top priority for universities (UUK and PAPYRUS, 2018).

Despite numerous initiatives to address student mental health, the effectiveness of suicide prevention implementation in universities remains limited by gaps in how these implementation strategies are communicated and understood. Universities should not only develop policies but also ensure that they are clearly communicated to stakeholders, including faculty, staff, and students, to foster a coordinated approach to suicide prevention (Hughes and Spanner, 2019; Kasal et al., 2023).

This research aims to explore how universities communicate suicide prevention implementation, focusing on how these communications facilitate stakeholder understanding. Specifically, the study examines mental health and suicide prevention sensemaking cues found in publicly available documents provided for various internal stakeholders. To address this, the research will seek to answer the following question:

How do universities communicate student mental health and suicide prevention implementation to facilitate stakeholder meaning-making?

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on organisational sensemaking, with a particular focus on how universities can engage stakeholders in addressing grand challenges such as suicide prevention. By examining how universities converge distributed sensemaking across diverse stakeholders, this research provides fresh theoretical insights into routine sensemaking management and offers practical guidance for enhancing suicide prevention initiatives.

The following section reviews the relevant literature on sensemaking theory and its application to organisational communication, particularly focusing on the context of suicide prevention. Subsequently, the research design and methodology are outlined.

Sensemaking and sensegiving in organisations

Sensemaking, as developed by Weick (1995), is the process by which individuals and organisations give meaning to complex, ambiguous, or uncertain situations. Sensemaking is defined as a “process through which managers and other organisational actors come to understand events or issues, constructing meanings by extracting, interpreting and acting upon cues from their environment” (Whittle, Vaara and Maitlis, 2023, p. 1808). It often occurs in situations of uncertainty or ambiguity, such as when organisations implement new strategies (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking is particularly relevant during crises or periods of change, where individuals and groups need to interpret information from their environment and decide how to act based on the spotted cues (Weick, 1995).

In the context of suicide prevention, sensemaking plays a critical role in how internal stakeholders—such as university staff and faculty—understand their roles in identifying, intervening, and responding to at-risk students. These individuals need to extract cues from both the organisational environment (e.g., policies, training materials) and the broader societal context to form a coherent understanding of their responsibilities. Successful sensemaking can lead to coordinated, timely responses to suicide risks, while breakdowns in sensemaking can result in delays, confusion, or failure to intervene (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

While sensemaking is the process of constructing meaning, sensegiving refers to the efforts by organisational leaders to shape how others interpret and make sense of an issue (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). Sensegiving as one of the constructs of sensemaking is a crucial organisational communicative activity (Whittle, Vaara and Maitlis, 2023). The concept of sensegiving is initiated and defined by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p. 442) as “the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others towards a preferred definition of reality”. Later, (Weick, Sutcliffe and Obstfeld, 2005b, p. 416) defined it as “a sensemaking variant undertaken to create meanings for a target audience”. Sensegiving was developed by (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007) by placing language at the core of this process. They stated that sensegiving is an “interpretive process in which actors influence each other through persuasive or evocative language, and it is used both by organisational leaders and other stakeholders, including middle managers, directors, and other employees” (Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007, p. 57). Research has shown that sensegiving is particularly important during periods of implementing change initiatives, where confusion about new roles, practices, or expectations can hinder implementation efforts (Rheinhardt and Gioia, 2021).

Both sensemaking and sensegiving are interrelated and both are relevant to this study, as universities both influence how their internal stakeholders interpret suicide prevention (sensegiving) and rely on these stakeholders to make sense of cues and their roles in response to evolving challenges (sensemaking). In suicide prevention, where coordination and clarity are critical, effective sensegiving can reduce ambiguity and create a shared understanding of the necessary actions to prevent suicide (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Change is ultimately successful when it is translated into meaningful understanding, with sensegiving playing a critical role in helping individuals and teams grasp and implement new directions (Rheinhardt and Gioia, 2021).

Organisational communication plays a critical role in shaping how strategies are understood, accepted, and implemented by various stakeholders (Schakel, Van Fenema and Faraj, 2016). In the context of suicide prevention, universities rely on a range of communicative activities—such as policy dissemination, training, and public-facing documents—to inform, guide, and align the actions of their stakeholders (Smith, 2021).

Communicative activities refer to the structured actions and interactions that leaders use to shape stakeholders’ understanding and engagement with organisational goals (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis, 2005; Maitlis and Lawrence, 2007). For universities, these activities are crucial in ensuring that all stakeholders are aware of suicide risk factors, understand their roles, and have access to the resources necessary to prevent suicide (Smith,

2021). Effective communication in this context reduces confusion about roles and responsibilities, aligns actions across different groups, and enhances the university's capacity to respond proactively to suicide risks (Cornelissen, Mantere and Vaara, 2014). In the context of suicide prevention,

communication serves not just as a means of spreading awareness but as a tool for facilitating sensemaking and coordinated actions and empowering individuals to take responsibility for prevention, intervention and support.

Sensemaking theory is widely applied in organisational studies, especially in times of crisis or organisational change. However, the literature primarily focuses on episodic, high-stakes events like corporate crises or natural disasters (Maitlis and Christianson, 2014; Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2015; Whittle, Vaara and Maitlis, 2023). This has led to a rich understanding of how organisations make sense of sudden disruptions but leaves a gap in understanding how sensemaking occurs around routine or ongoing issues, like mental health and suicide prevention, that require continuous engagement and interpretation across multiple stakeholders. Moreover, research tends to focus heavily on crisis communication or post-crisis recovery efforts, especially in corporate or governmental settings. Suicide prevention, however, is a preventive initiative that requires continuous, clear communication to avert crises rather than react to them. This type of preventive communication strategy is less developed in the literature. This study addresses this gap by focusing on latent (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2020; Whittle, Vaara and Maitlis, 2023) sensemaking (i.e., sensemaking that happens routinely and is embedded in daily activities), particularly in the context of suicide prevention.

While sensemaking theory has been widely applied in contexts of organisational change and crisis, there is limited research on how it operates in structured, routine-based preventive strategies. This is particularly evident in contexts like suicide prevention in higher education, where communicative actions are embedded in ongoing institutional routines such as policies, training, and informational resources. Existing literature tends to focus on acute, time-bound events (e.g., corporate scandals, disasters), overlooking how meaning is constructed and reinforced in preventive settings that lack clear triggers or endpoints (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2020). Addressing this gap extends sensemaking theory into latent domains, where distributed cues require continuous interpretation and alignment. Moreover, organisational routines—despite their ubiquity—remain underexplored as vehicles for either reinforcing or transforming stakeholders' interpretive processes. By examining suicide prevention as a case of routine-based sensegiving, this study contributes to emerging conversations on how mundane, ongoing practices become sites for meaning negotiation, institutional alignment, and stakeholder mobilisation (Whittle, Vaara & Maitlis, 2023; Cornelissen, Mantere & Vaara, 2014). This conceptual shift not only broadens the application of sensemaking theory but also informs how organisations address complex, value-laden challenges through embedded communication strategies. In the following section, the research methodology is outlined.

Methodology:

This research adopts a qualitative single case study design (Yin, 2014), exploring communicative actions in organisational documents and website content from one selected

university in England. The selection criteria included previous experience with student suicide, accessibility of relevant documents, clarity of SP actionability, and ongoing SP initiatives. The data set for this study comprises various types of documents sourced from the case University. These documents are selected to provide a comprehensive understanding of how university use communicative actions to facilitate internal stakeholders' understanding of the suicide prevention. As illustrated in Table 1, the sample includes strategy, policy, report and web-based resources, each offering insights into the University's approach to empowering stakeholders and addressing mental health and SP.

Table 1- Sample selection summary

Document Type	No of pages/words
Strategy	101 pages
Policy and procedure	195 pages
Report	584 pages
Guidance and advice	26 pages
Web page	37,923 words /155 pages

Data analysis

Data analysis follows an inductive approach (Langley, 1999; Delmestri and Greenwood, 2016). Since the research design is qualitative and inductive, the principles of grounded theory are followed (Höllerer, Jancsary and Grafström, 2018). The first step for analysing is developing a historical overview of key events relevant to suicide prevention in higher education to map who did what and when and who said what and when. A timeline of key events (See Appendix) is created spanning from 2018 to 2024, to capture critical moments such as an evidence session on a petition started by bereaved parents, which calls on the government to introduce a statutory duty of care for higher education students, the release of new national suicide prevention guidelines, a campaign of bereaved families to make a change in HE, or Human Rights Commission (EHRC) has published new guidance for the HE sector from the legal case of University of Bristol vs Abrahart. These key events help situate the university's internal communicative actions within the larger context of sector-wide change, allowing for a deeper understanding of how the university's suicide prevention policies have evolved. While some studies in the sensemaking literature rely on interview-based or observational data, this study deliberately focuses on institutional documents as the primary data source. This methodological choice aligns with the research objective of analysing how formal communicative actions—such as policies, reports, and strategic documents—function as tools of organisational sensegiving and shape stakeholders' understanding through structured routines. By concentrating on the textual and discursive features of organisational communication, this study contributes to a growing strand of research that views meaning-making as embedded within institutional language and practices, rather than solely derived from individual narratives.

Familiarisation- Textual data were reviewed to gain an initial understanding of how the university communicate suicide prevention to internal stakeholders. This process involved addressing questions such as: what communicative channels does the university use to engage stakeholders in sensemaking. Familiarisation allowed for a comprehensive overview of the university efforts in implementing suicide prevention strategies and clarified communicative written channels in which these actions are communicated.

Open coding (In progress)- Using an inductive approach, the data are coded line by line by to identify key concepts or patterns. This stage aims to capture meaningful elements directly from the data without imposing preconceived frameworks.

Category formation (In progress)- Similar codes are grouped into broader categories based on recurring themes and relationships observed in the data. This process focuses on developing an organised structure that highlights emerging concepts relevant to the study's objectives. This stage will articulate the main insight derived from the data and align them with the research question.

Theme development (In progress) - The next step involves analysis and refining categories to identify overarching themes that represent the core findings. Emerging second-ordered themes are compared with existing theories to develop broader, more abstract aggregate dimensions (Langley, 1999; Delmestri and Greenwood, 2016).

Cross-check (Planned)- Findings will be compared across different categories of communicative actions to ensure consistency and identify any contradictions or gaps. This iterative process ensures the robustness of the data analysis.

Theoretical reflection (Planned)- The analysis is refined through repeated iterations, involving back-and-forth engagement between the findings and existing literature. This process helps clarify and confirm the emerging results. This stage will position the findings within the broader literature and enhance their theoretical significance. Table 4 shows the stages are involved in data analysis.

Table 2- Data analysis stages

	Stages	Researcher input	Outcome
1	Identifying key events	Develop an overview of key events (2018-2024) related to suicide prevention in higher education to map who did what and when and who said what and when.	To situate the university's internal communicative actions within the larger context of sector-wide
2	Familiarisation	Review textual data with the open questions of what communicative action channels the university communicates to stakeholders	To gain an initial understanding of key communicative actions related to suicide prevention
3	Open coding	Code data inductively, identifying key concepts and patterns emerging from the documents	To capture and categorise meaningful elements directly from the data.
4	Category formation	Group similar codes into broader categories based on recurring themes and relationships observed in the data.	To develop an organised structure of emerging concepts.
5	Theme development	Analyse and refine categories into overarching themes that represent the core findings from the data.	To identify and articulate the main insights grounded in the data.
6	Cross check	Compare findings across different communicative actions category	To ensure consistency and identify any inconsistencies or contradictions
7	Theoretical reflection	Reflect on how the findings relate to existing theories or contribute to new theoretical insights	To position findings within the broader literature and contribute to theoretical knowledge

Next steps:

As this study progresses, the next stages will involve completing the inductive coding of the full dataset and finalising theme development. These themes will then be compared against the existing literature to refine theoretical contributions, particularly in terms of latent sensemaking and communicative routines.

References

- Auerbach, R.P. *et al.* (2018) 'WHO World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders.', *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 127(7), pp. 623–638. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000362>.
- BBC News (2024) "Higher tuition fees and direct government funding needed to halt growing deficit, universities say". Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/czxdd7qglp6o>.
- Cornelissen, J.P., Mantere, S. and Vaara, E. (2014) 'The contraction of meaning: The combined effect of communication, emotions, and materiality on sensemaking in the Stockwell shooting', *Journal of Management Studies*, 51(5), pp. 699–736.
- Delmestri, G. and Greenwood, R. (2016) 'How Cinderella Became a Queen: Theorizing Radical Status Change', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 61(4), pp. 507–550. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001839216644253>.
- Gioia, D.A. and Chittipeddi, K. (1991) 'Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation', *Strategic management journal*, 12(6), pp. 433–448.
- Höllerer, M.A., Jancsary, D. and Grafström, M. (2018) "A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words": Multimodal Sensemaking of the Global Financial Crisis', *Organization Studies*, 39(5–6), pp. 617–644. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840618765019>.
- Hughes, G. and Spanner, L. (2019) 'The university mental health charter', *Leeds: Student Minds* [Preprint].
- Kasal, A. *et al.* (2023) 'Facilitators and barriers to implementation of suicide prevention interventions: Scoping review', *Cambridge Prisms: Global Mental Health*, 10, p. e15. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1017/gmh.2023.9>.
- Langley, A. (1999) 'Strategies for Theorizing from Process Data', *The Academy of Management Review*, 24(4), p. 691. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/259349>.
- Maitlis, S. (2005) 'The social processes of organizational sensemaking', *Academy of management journal*, 48(1), pp. 21–49.
- Maitlis, S. and Christianson, M. (2014) 'Sensemaking in organizations: Taking stock and moving forward', *Academy of Management Annals*, 8(1), pp. 57–125.
- Maitlis, S. and Lawrence, T.B. (2007) 'Triggers And Enablers Of Sensegiving In Organizations', *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(1), pp. 57–84. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2007.24160971>.

Rheinhardt, A. and Gioia, D.A. (2021) *Sensemaking, sensegiving, and the new generation*. Oxford University Press.

Sandberg, J. and Tsoukas, H. (2015) 'Making sense of the sensemaking perspective: Its constituents, limitations, and opportunities for further development', *Journal of organizational behavior*, 36(S1), pp. S6–S32.

Sandberg, J. and Tsoukas, H. (2020) 'Sensemaking Reconsidered: Towards a broader understanding through phenomenology', *Organization Theory*, 1(1), p. 263178771987993. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2631787719879937>.

Schakel, J.-K., Van Fenema, P.C. and Faraj, S. (2016) 'Shots Fired! Switching Between Practices in Police Work', *Organization Science*, 27(2), pp. 391–410. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2016.1048>.

Smith, J. (2021) *Preventing and Responding to Student Suicide: A Practical Guide for FE and HE Settings*. Edited by Mallon, S. and Smith, J. Jessica Kingsley.

UUK and PAPYRUS (2018) 'Suicide-Safer Universities'. London: UUK.

Weick, K.E. (1995) *Sensemaking in organizations*. Sage.

Weick, K.E., Sutcliffe, K.M. and Obstfeld, D. (2005) 'Organizing and the process of sensemaking', *Organization science*, 16(4), pp. 409–421.

Whittle, A., Vaara, E. and Maitlis, S. (2023) 'The Role of Language in Organizational Sensemaking: An Integrative Theoretical Framework and an Agenda for Future Research', *Journal of Management*, 49(6), pp. 1807–1840. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063221147295>.

WHO, W.H.O. (2021) 'Mental health and COVID-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact. Geneva: World Health Organization.' Available at: <https://www.who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/covid-19>.