

### **Public Relations Strategies in the Management of Tertiary Institutions in the Post COVID-19 Era in Nigeria**

#### **Abstract**

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and the prolonged economic lockdown to limit the spread of the virus have affected all sectors of the economy. Educational sector in particular is badly affected by the pandemic as schools were closed and educational activities seized to move on. However, the recent decision to reopen the schools for academic activities to move on has placed heavy burden of effective management of the process among various school administrators for safe reopening and recovery. How Public Relations which is part of the management of every organisation is useful in achieving the desired objective of the process remains very crucial. Anchored by the Stakeholders Theory and Excellence Theory of Public Relations, data was sourced through relevant existing empirical and theoretical materials. The paper revealed that the use of Public Relations as part of the management can go a long way to engage communities in reopening plans; help in targeting resources to where they are most needed; getting children back to school; making school environments safe; and recovering learning loss and building back better, which is a deliberate policy for school reopening and recovery from the COVID-19. The paper concluded that Public Relations in the recovery process of tertiary institutions from the COVID-19 lockdown is very necessary. However, inadequate involvement of Public Relations Unit in the decision-making process on school recovery, excessive management influence on the operations of the unit, lack of funds, lack of professionals to handle the unit among others can limit the success in the application of public relations in the recovery process among Nigerian tertiary institutions.

#### **Introduction**

Public Relations is one of the areas that attracts tremendous attention of scholars across disciplines. This is due to its relevance in the coordination and management of modern organisations. It is believed that in this interdependent world, it has really become important for almost every kind of institutions to keep a long term and trustworthy relations with the community or public groups in order to handle upcoming challenges and also to maintain its survival and success (Dornyo & Adiku, 2015; Okafor & Nwatu, 2018). Understood as a planned management function through which public and private organizations seek to win and retain the understanding, sympathy, and support of their potential and active customers, public relations activities help to provide a coordinated effort to communicate a positive image of the organisation and promote the availability resources, programmes and services (Musa, 2016).

It has been stated that tertiary institutions over the years have adopted professional public relations practice owing to rapid expansion of its stakeholders, increase in staff and students' population and the complex social issues that they grapple with. Owing to expansion in staff and

students' population, communication effectiveness and efficiency has also become a formidable task for most tertiary institutions. For instance, the crowding of campuses, inadequacy of accommodation, escalation of fees and limited amenities are some of the problems bothering all stakeholders that need to be explained to their satisfaction. Adequate and satisfying explanations to such problems certainly require a well-coordinated system of information service delivery for which effective public relations is required. This suggests that there is the need to look for effective ways of sharing or exchanging information with students, tax payers, alumni and other interested parties. Therefore, new and more innovative ways of facilitating communication between the larger community and the minority must be sought (Aikins & Adu-Oppong, 2015; Bates, 2006; Eniola, 2011; Sharp and Pritchard, 2003; Veena, Dayaneethie & Zukiswo, 2012). There is evidence that in recent years, numerous Universities have established public relations units. They have done so in order to better communicate with students, alumni, donors, neighboring communities, and other publics (Grillis, 1997; Kettman and Robinson, 1991; Mullins, 1996). They (Universities) look up to public relations units to manage crises, boost rankings, increase donations, and carry out a variety of other tasks (Hirsh and Weber, 1999; Ojumo, Nikona & Kiroma, 2006; Spagnolia, 1998).

Since its outbreak in Wuhan City of China, the Coronavirus has come to dominate and change man's life so momentarily with obnoxious burden and consequential effects which is overwhelming while cutting across all facets of man's life and institutions. COVID-19 has induced newer culture and fine-tuned social group networking attitude and behaviour as well as gradually changing the working and interdependence of institutions in phases (Anthony & Damiete, 2021; Bintube, 2020). Consequently, schools and tertiary institutions in particular are among organisations that are badly affected by the Covid-19 outbreak due to measures initiated to curtail the spread, including school closure (Fadele, Abubakar, Olfat & Salamah, 2022; Nwafor, Omoevah & Umuze, 2022; UNICEF, 2021; Yunusa et al. 2021). However, now that countries around the world have eased their lockdown measures, including reopening of the schools, examining the public relations strategies appropriate for school reopening and recovery from lockdown remains imperative, hence, the need for this study.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main concern of this paper is to educate stakeholders on the public relations strategies appropriate in the management of tertiary institutions in this post COVID-19 in Nigeria. Specifically, this paper is focused in achieving the following:

- i. To review the concepts of public relations and COVID-19.
- ii. To review the impact of COVID-19 on Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria.
- iii. To review the role of public relations in organisations.
- iv. To review the role of public relations in tertiary institutions
- v. To suggest the role of public relations in the management of tertiary institutions in the post COVID-19 Lockdown Era.
- vi. To discuss the likely challenges against the application of public relations in the management of tertiary institutions in the post COVID-19 lockdown era.

### **Research Methodology**

This study adopted secondary research design to examine public relations approach appropriate in the management of tertiary institutions in the post COVID-19 lockdown regime or era in Nigeria. Consequently, sources from which data were harvested to address the concern of this study included Google search, Google Scholar, ResearchGate and journals, books, periodicals, etc. Materials selected and used in this work were those relevant to address the problem of this paper.

## **Public Relations (PR)**

Public relations have been defined in many ways. Rex Harlow, a Stanford professor and founder of the organization that became the Public Relations Society of America, once compiled more than 500 definitions from almost as many sources. The definitions ranged from the simple, “Doing good and getting credit for it,” to more verbose definitions. PR consists of all forms of planned communication, outwards and inwards, between an organisation and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding (Jefkins, 2006). The literature presents public relations as a management function, which uses the attributes of management (e.g., planning, collaborative decision making, and research) to foster the organization’s ability to build mutually beneficial relationships on which the corporate vision and mission depend (Grunig, 2001). The second stream in the literature presents public relations as communication management, which focuses on the flow of communication between an organization and its publics to achieve effective relationships (Grunig, 2001). The third stream of literature presents public relations as relationship management, so that communication is a property of those relationships rather than the conduit between organizations and publics (Ferguson, 2004; Broom, Casey, and Ritchey, 2007).

While a lot people seem to have a good idea about public relations, few seem to agree on one definition American historian Robert Heilbroner cited in Cutlip& Center, 1978), describe the field as “a brotherhood of some 100,000 whose common bond is its profession and whose common woe is that no two of them can ever quite agree on what the profession is”. Basically, Heilbroner is right, although there have been serious efforts to come up with a suitable definition. One of the most ambitious searches for a universal definition was that commissioned in 1975 by the foundation of public relations research and education. Sixty public relations leaders participated in the study, which analyzed 472 different definitions and offered the following definition. Public relations are a distinctive management function which helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between the organization and its public. Involves the management of problems or issues, helps management to keep Informed on and responsive to public opinion. The British Institute of public relations “public relation is a deliberate, planned, and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics” (Jethwaney & Sarkar, 2000). Broom and Trucker (2008) defined public relations as the management process whose goal is to attain and maintain accord and positive behaviours among social groupings on which an organization depends to achieve its mission. Its fundamental responsibility is to build and maintain a hospitable environment for an organization. James (2006) defines public relations as the management of communication between an organization and its publics.

The key words in the definition of public relations include:

- i. Deliberate. Public relations activity is intentional. It is designed to influence, gain understanding, provide information, and obtain feedback from those affected by the activity.
- ii. Planned. Public relations activity is organized. Solutions to problems are discovered and logistics are thought out, with the activity taking place over a period of time. It is systematic, requiring research and analysis.
- iii. Performance. Effective public relations is based on actual policies and performance. No number of public relations will generate goodwill and support if the organization has poor policies and is unresponsive to public concerns.
- iv. Public interest. Public relations activity should be mutually beneficial to the organization and the public; it is the alignment of the organization's self-interests with the public's concerns and interests.
- v. Two-way communication. Public relations is not just disseminating information but also the art of listening and engaging in a conversation with various publics.
- vi. Management function. Public relations is most effective when it is a strategic and integral part of decision making by top management. Public relations involves counseling, problem solving, and the management of competition and conflict.

In the context of educational process, Public relations is defined as a planned and systematic management function to help improve the programmes and services of the educational system (Okwelle, 2010). In the same vein, Greg (2012) described school public relations as a management function that establishes and maintains two-way mutual relationships and communication between the school and the community. A careful look at the above definitions shows that school public relations relies on a comprehensive two-way communication process involving both internal publics (students and staff) and external public (parents, government and general public) with a common goal of stimulating a better understanding of the roles, objectives, accomplishments and needs of the school. The purpose of a school public relations programme according to Gorton as cited by Ibeneme & Okwelle (2008) includes: (a) Selling the educational programme to the people of the community so that they will take pride in and support the schools; (b) Interpreting to the people of the community the educational programme that is in operation so that the people will have a better understanding of what the school are doing and will support the school programme; (c) Encourage the community interest and participation in the school programme.

### **Coronavirus (Covid-19) Pandemic**

Coronavirus disease 2019 is an infectious disease that is popularly known as Covid-19 (Moore, 2020; Ohia, Bakarey & Ahmad, 2020; Otache, 2020). The disease is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2; otherwise known as SARS- CoV-2 (Adnan, Khan, Kazmi, Bashir & Siddique, 2020; Harapan, Itoh, Yufika, Winardi, Keam & Mudatsir, 2020; Ohia et al., 2020; Otache, 2020; Poudel, Poudel, Gautam, Phuyal, & Tiwari, 2020). Its symptoms include fever, cough, shortness of breath, sore throat, runny nose, sneezing, among others (Harapan, Itoh, Yufika, Winardi, Keam, & Mudatsir, 2020; Ohia et al., 2020; Otache, 2020; Unhale et al., 2020). It is a highly communicable disease (Adnan et al., 2020) and its mode of transmission is from person-to-person (Otache, 2020; Unhale et al., 2020). Transmission occurs among close contacts mostly through respiratory droplets released when the infected person sneezes or coughs (Harapan, Itoh, Yufika, Winardi, Keam, Te, et al., 2020; Otache, 2020). While measures such as

lockdown, social distancing, self-isolation or self-quarantine and observation of simple hygiene habits such as regular washing of hands, wearing of facemasks and covering the mouth with a handkerchief when coughing or sneezing have been recommended to contain the spread of the disease among people (Ohia et al., 2020; Otache, 2020) it is important to note that there is no any known cure or vaccine for the Covid-19 pandemic presently (Adnan et al., 2020; Otache, 2020).

### **Impacts of COVID-19 on Tertiary Education in Nigeria**

The outbreak of COVID-19 impacted all sectors of the economy, including education. For instance, it has been reported that the Coronavirus deadly disease has resulted to total shutting of schools in about 215 countries all over the world with 91.4% of the total number of enrolled learners in these countries momentarily mandatory out of school (UNESCO, 2020). It is accounted that over 1.6 billion students transversely the world which were obliged to stay out of schools as social distancing was enforced locally and regionally around the world in order to enclose the extend of coronavirus disease (Olaitan, Abdullahi, Tolorunju, Akinjo & Ogunjemilua, 2020).

It can be noted that Africa was one of the continents which educational systems have been typically affected by the deadly disease as more than 98% of teaching and learning cannot be performed suitable to country-wide lockdown in this continent. In the shutting of schools across Sub Sahara Africa, including Nigeria of which over 91 percent are primary and secondary school learners (Olaitan, Abdullahi, Tolorunju, Akinjo & Ogunjemilua, 2020).

In a short time, COVID-19 has disrupted the landscape of learning in Sub Sahara Africa by limiting how students can access learning across the country. However, apart from the pharmaceutical interventions and other preventive measures like using of facemask, washing of hands, social distancing has been the most effective way of minimizing the spread of COVID-19. The effective implementation of social distancing demands that schools be closed for as long as each government from different countries are certain that the pandemic has been curtailed enough for the safety of learners and teachers before recommence back to the class (Olaitan, Abdullahi, Tolorunju, Akinjo & Ogunjemilua, 2020). Ngogi & Mahaye (2020) observed that long periods of learning would be lost for as long as the closures lasted. Kekić et al. (2016) reported that schools losing long periods of learning because of the disease outbreak can upshot to both chronological and stable smash up on educational system. The temporal damage includes disruption of curriculum which could take a long time to be recovered while the undeviating spoil which include the actuality that some students may never come again to school even when the infection outbreak ended Because of the doubts contiguous to the inhibition of COVID-19 in Sub Sahara Africa. It is envisioning that social distancing could still be implemented further than the time expected. The department of education has postulated a steady reopening of schools which it has described as “Phasing in Approach” in South Africa (HEDCOM, 2020).

Otache (2020) studied the “the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the nigeria’s economy and possible coping strategies” and found that jobs losses, a sharp drop in income of the informal workers and the poor, food insecurity, business and school closures, a steep decline in oil revenues and economic uncertainties were some of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The eruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Olaitan, Abdullahi, Tolorunju, Akinjo & Ogunjemilua (2020) observed, has affected every sphere of life and may forever change how we have always lived and conducted our businesses, and no one can resist the wind of change that is

blowing. Of all the sectors of governance, the educational sector, particularly at the tertiary level, appears to have been most greatly affected and therefore requires a more pragmatic approach to resolution. The impact of the COVID-19, according to Nwafor, Omoevah & Umuze (2022), has made all schools in Anambra State, both public and private, were asked to abandon the buildings, including tertiary institutions, since this was the only choice left to protect the lives of the state's future generation.

Similarly, the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic has had an impact on the global economy as well as the Nigerian school system. It caused significant gaps in the academic calendars of many academic institutions at all levels (Fadele, Abubakar, Olfat & Salamah, 2022). The pandemic's impacts on children's access and quality of education are most severely felt through the tracking closure of schools without adequate alternative education services accessible by all children, nation-wide. These measures are likely to exacerbate existing inequities in education in the short and long terms and worsen existing barriers to access. Nationwide school closures began on March 16, affecting approximately 9,253,063 learners between pre-primary and secondary education levels (UNICEF, 2021).

However, now there is gradual ease of lockdown of sectors in many countries of the world, including the educational sector in Nigeria and it is imperative that public relations strategies appropriate in the revival of the sector, particular tertiary education is suggested.

### **The Importance and Functions of Public Relations in Organisations**

Generally, there are a number of functions that the public relations managers in organisations perform in the achievement of the set goals and objectives. Some of the activities carried out by the public relations experts include: Counseling; Research; Media relations; Publicity; Employee/member relations; Community relations; Public affairs; Government affairs; Issues management; Financial relations; Industry relations; Development/fund-raising; Multicultural relations/workplace diversity; Special events; Marketing communications. According to Roger (1994), public relations helps to build and maintain public confidence in the organization 's marketing activities. To him, some of the functions of public relations are:

- i. Improving awareness.
- ii. Projecting credibility.
- iii. Combating competition.
- iv. Evaluating new market.
- v. Reinforcing the effectiveness of sales promotion and advertisement.
- vi. Introducing new products or services.
- vii. Building brand loyalty, and
- viii. Dealing with customer issue.

From the forgoing, Musa (2016) noted that there are ways in which public relations contributes to the fulfillment of marketing of services, these, according to him include:

- i. Developing new prospects for new markets, such as people who inquire after seeing or hearing a product release in the news media.
- ii. Helping to sale minor product that don't have large advertising budget.
- iii. Establishing the corporation as an authoritative source of information on a given product.

- iv. Generating sales leads, usually through articles in the trade press about new product and services.
- v. Providing inexpensive sales literature, because articles about the company and its services can be reprinted as informative pieces for prospective customers.
- vi. Providing the third party endorsement via newspapers, magazines, radio and televisions, through news release about a company's product or services, community involvement, inventions and new plans.

Cutlip, Cente & Broom (1988), present the following as the major functions of public relations:

- i. To serve as the central source of information about the organization, and as the official channel of communication between the organization and the public;
- ii. To bring to public attention through appropriate media, significant facts, opinions, and interpretations which will serve to keep the public aware of the organization's policies and actions;
- iii. To coordinate activities which affects the organization's relationship with the general public, or with special public or groups;
- iv. To collect and analyze information on the changing attitudes of key public groups towards the organization, and
- v. To plan and administer informational programs designed to fulfill most effectively, the responsibilities and functions outlined above.

Omolola (2016), who conducted a study on "*An Assessment of Public Relations as a Tool for Repositioning the Image of the Nigerian Police Force: A Study of Lagos Command*" revealed that although, the Nigerian Public Relations Department (NPPRD)'s activities is beginning to penetrate into the minds of the publics, its current media relations practice must be addressed. According to the study, concerted efforts must still be made to completely erase police negative image. Such effort will achieve unprecedented success when backed by adequate funding by necessary authorities. The study recommended that henceforth, police personnel that will be appointed to Man the NPPRD must be certified public relations persons. Also, the discriminatory media relations practice of the PPRO, Lagos command must be urgently addressed. More importantly, the study recommended that adequate funding must be provided to enhance the operations of the police.

### **Public Relations in Tertiary Institutions**

Educational institutions in the society are saddled with the task of introducing members of the society into the knowledge, skills and values of the society from one generation to another. This preposition, which enjoys scholarly confirmations by Schofield (1990) and Afangideh (2010), suggests that, educational institutions are vehicles used by societies to keep its past and present alive while also ensuring that, the future is positively predicted, through the works done today. They are therefore agents of socialization for individual and societal development (Okohi & Nath, 2019). This implies that educational institutions are important segment of the society and are crucial in the growth and development of the society in general. It goes to mean therefore that concerted effort must be made at all time to ensure the effective development of the sector. Such efforts must also include the use of effective communication.

Consequently, previous empirical and theoretical literature has shown a correlation between public relations practice and the performance of educational institutions in general and the tertiary institutions in particular. For instance, Wilson & Rahila (2014) conducted the study on *“Community Relations: An Impetus for Educational Growth and Development in Nigeria”* and found that as fracas between institutions of learning and their host communities has become a reoccurring trend in Nigeria, it is imperative to adopt community. The conclusion of their study is that if properly harnessed, community relation would certainly enhance the performance of institutions in Nigeria. Adelakun (2020), studied on the *“School-Community Relationship and Sustainable Development in Nigeria: Challenges and Way Forward”* and concluded that no school can exist in isolation of the community and its agencies. In fact the development of the school to a large extent is determined by the relationship that co-exists between the school and the host community. The study recommended that (1) School administrators and managers should not be involved in local politics in order to win the approval of the masses from the community; (2) Government should provide portable business as means of livelihood for the citizens who are below the line of development in order to reduce the level of poverty; (3) School should collaborate with the National Commission for Mass Literacy, Adult and Non formal Education and all its locally based agencies in the country should intensify their efforts in fighting increasing rate of illiteracy in the country; (4) Government should make rigorous effort to reduce the rate of unemployment in the country; (5) While planning the educational policy formulation, and execution of educational projects, local communities should be fully involved and carried along. The introduction of School Based Management Committee (S.B.M.C.) to replace the then Parent Teachers Association should encourages and provides wider scope for community participation in educational development; (6) Government should sensitize the schools and the communities on the benefits attached to allowing good relationship to coexist between the school and the community members; (7) School leaders should ensure that community leaders and relevant stakeholder are carried along in needed activities of the school to ensure smooth interaction.

Okohiand & Nath (2019), in their study on the *“Staff Personnel and School-Community Relations Management Practices of Educational Administrators for Secondary School Environmental Safety in Rivers State of Nigeria”* found that the personnel and school-community relations management practices of educational administrators for secondary school environmental safety include, ensuring that efficient welfare services are put in place to keep school members motivated and the use of social networks for encouraging interpersonal relationship among stakeholders to ensure environmental safety in schools. Okwelle & Agwi (2018), studied on the *“Strategies for Improving Female Students’ Enrolment in Technical and Vocational Education Programmes through Public Relations Activities in Nigeria”* and found that effective supervision of students on industrial training and teaching practice, introducing public relations activities into the school curriculum and sponsoring and participating in students organizations and programmes were some of the strategies for improving female students involvement in public relations. Consequently, it was recommended that (1) Schools with TVET programmes should as a matter of urgency have in place well coordinated public relations unit with responsibilities of female students’ well defined; (2) School public relation officers should ensure that they carry students’ along during public relations activities/programmes of the school; (3) Effective supervision of students on industrial training and teaching practice should be encouraged; (4) School public relations activities should be included in the school curriculum;

(5) Recognizing/rewarding outstanding students' achievement through awards and commendation should be given urgent attention by TVE institutions.

Musa (2016), studied the “*Public Relations Strategies for Information Service Provision in Federal University Libraries in North Western States of Nigeria*” and concluded that public relations has indeed improved relationship and has led to mutual collaboration among University libraries and their various publics. Okafor & Nwatu (2018), in their study on the “*Public Relations as a Tool for Attaining Educational Institution Objectives in Enugu State*” found that reputation management, customer relations, media relations, social media and corporate social responsibility on achieving educational institution objectives was positively significant respectively. Aikins & Adu-Oppong (2015) underscore that the role usually played by Public relations in educational institutions is to manage the flow of both internal and external communication. According to Sietel (2009) “Public Relations Practice is based on two-way communications facilitated through a multimedia approach and is founded on research.” The traditional role of the education public Relations specialist has been that of a scribe and paper mover, whose purpose typically was to inform but often to publicize. For the most part, the duties of the educational public relations specialist or practitioner was the recording and publishing of minutes of board meetings, the development of brochures for financial campaigns and even the supervision of the school newspaper when the positions was half rather than full time (Ojomo et al, 2006).

Historically, the practice of public relations within Universities has been one-way, asymmetrical (Pirozek & Heskova, 2003). In the past, practitioners have engaged in public relations practice that placed a great deal of emphasis on media relations. In recent years, however, scholars have advocated a strategic approach to University public relations that moves beyond media relations and embraces strategic management, two-way symmetrical communication, and various other Excellence principles. This strategic perspective is evident in recent studies of public relations in the University setting. Samsup, Brunner & Hon (2002), for example, examined how practitioners can measure relationships in a university setting. DeSanto & Garner (2001) recommended that university public relations practitioners set synchronized goals, identify stakeholders, and conduct evaluations. Grillis (1997) argued that it is critical for public relations practitioners to have access to the top leaders within a university. Henderson (2001) proposed a four-step process for managing communication in universities: research, planning, communication, and evaluation. This emphasis on strategic public relations management is clearly evident in research done by scholars studying the practice of public relations by universities in the former Soviet-bloc countries (Hall, 2002; Hall & Baker, 2003; Pabich, 2003). Universities in former Soviet-bloc are facing complex environments. The introduction of capitalism has meant that old state-owned universities, which never had to compete, now find themselves losing students to new private universities that offer attractive packages to students (Miroiu, 1998; Neculau, 1997; Stanciulescu, 2002). This competition has prompted both state-owned and private Universities to seek to utilize public relations as means of getting an edge. In the past, public relations practice at these Universities was a mixture of marketing, advertising, and lobbying (Coman, 2003).

Other studies, however, have advocated a move away from one-way asymmetrical methods and toward practices that resemble the characteristics conceptualized in the Excellence study. Pirozek & Heskova (2003), for example, examined the public relations practice of a university in the Czech Republic. They showed how the two-way symmetrical tactics of research and feedback

systems helped the University gain a better understanding of the attitudes of its key publics. Kaverina's (2003) study of a state University in Russia showed how two-way symmetrical efforts to initiate dialogue (e.g. radio call in shows, open house functions) helped strengthen the relationship between the University and its key publics. Popular publications aimed at university public relations practitioners have also advocated practices that are similar to the Excellence characteristics. Schoenfeld, Wiemer & Lang (1997) encouraged practitioners to embrace strategic planning and outcome evaluation. Jarrell (2003) encouraged universities to involve public relations in decision making because practitioners can lessen risk by forging good relations with publics and can scan for emerging issues. Simpson (2002) advised university communicators to build strong community relationships, take local concerns seriously, and attend to internal and external constituencies. Ross and Lindenmann (2002) suggested that practitioners clearly define their goals and measure output, outgrowth, and outcomes. Ross (2004) urged practitioners to utilize external research resources (e.g., consulting firms) to enhance their practice.

Flatt (2002) listed publicizing, advertising, marketing (of existing and new products services), editing and knowing basic graphic design, conducting budget and building referenda campaigns, public relations in service for administrators and staff, relating effectively to adults and youth in community problem solving situations, dealing with oral and written complains and organizing and administering communications plans for schools crisis, keeping accurate district public relations records, determining alternative futures and serving not only as the district peacemaker and public conscience but also as one of the superintendents key advisors, which includes speaking for him or her on occasions as some of the roles of public relations practitioners in schools.

### **Role of Public Relations in the Management of tertiary Institutions in the post COVID-19 Lockdown Era**

The impact of COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closedown of institutions, including schools across the globe including Nigeria. However, due to the reduction in the number of infection cases of the pandemic, measures adopted by government and organisations to reduce the chances contracting the virus, economic and social impacts of the long economic lockdown, among others, Nigeria is one among the countries that calls for reopening of the economic activities, including school. Now that the schools have reopened, a deliberate measure for quick recovery and revival remain very crucial and since public relations is part of the management in every organisation, its role in this regard is equally very crucial and should be acknowledged. Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman (2020) acknowledged that most governments around the world have temporarily closed schools in an attempt to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have launched distance learning programs and are beginning to plan for recovery, a phase that involves much more than reopening the gates and readmitting students. Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman (2020) added that in this context, education policymaking is particularly difficult but will be strongest when it is: (1) informed by existing rigorous evidence; (2) approached with a long-term perspective that prioritizes flexibility, communication, and trust; and (3) able to be adapted based on new data and information gained from community engagement and monitoring. They maintained that the short and accessible briefs collected here draw on rigorous evidence relevant to the COVID-19 emergency to

formulate recommendations for policymakers on five critical dimensions of school reopening and recovery:

- (1) Engaging communities in reopening plans;
- (2) Targeting resources to where they are most needed;
- (3) Getting children back to school;
- (4) Making school environments safe; and
- (5) Recovering learning loss and building back better.

Since tertiary institutions deal with a lot of publics, it become imperative that to make the goal of school reopening, revival and recovery realizable, both segments of the publics must be carried along and the role of Public Relations it a success remains necessary. Grunig (1992, p. 11) affirms that “autonomy [...] is an idealized goal that no organization ever achieves completely”. Public Relations practitioners, like the organizations they represent, are never completely autonomous from forces within and beyond the walls of the organization. For this reason, both practitioners and organizations must contend with and maintain interdependent relationships with numerous publics (Dozier and Grunig, 1992; Grunig, Grunig & Ehling, 1992; Grunig, 1992). Public Relations practitioners help organizations to “establish and maintain mutually dependent relationships between an organization and the publics with which it interacts” (Grunig, Grunig & Ehling, 1992, p. 71).

Therefore, as a tool in the management of organisations, the role of public relations in the revival and recovery of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria is revolves within the COVID-19 reopening school policy thus:

**Engaging communities in reopening plans:** It is a known fact that the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent economic lockdown including schools has grounded the activities of tertiary institutions across the country and reopening requires high level of community involvement. Public relations’ role in community relations and involvement therefore remains very crucial. According to Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman (2020), to productively engage communities and build the trust needed to design and implement effective reopening plans, Public Relations officers should:

- i. Prioritize community engagement early to build trust, shape perceptions of risk, and improve responses to government policy.
- ii. Share clear, credible, and consistent messaging through multiple channels to reach all groups and to match local resources and norms.

Trust, risk, and community participation a robust body of evidence suggests that establishing public trust, managing fear and perceptions of risk, and leveraging community engagement are key to effective crisis response. Governments need to decide how to engage community members in reopening plans and implementation; what, when, and how often information should be shared with affected communities; and with whom and through which channels to communicate. The evidence on building trust with communities affected by emergencies shows that: (i) Leveraging community involvement to build trust will play a vital role in facilitating the reopening process and in shaping public perceptions of the state over the long term; (ii) Effectively responding to health crises requires localized efforts to work with communities affected by the crisis. For the education sector, engaging teachers and teachers’ unions,

schoolbased management committees and other parent organizations throughout can increase the relevance of plans and compliance with government interventions as schools reopen (Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman, 2020).

For community relations, the best communication channels for reaching households will vary considerably across contexts but, wherever possible, multiple channels should be used to reach all groups. The evidence on effective communication strategies following an emergency indicates that: (i) Moving quickly to establish regular communication channels and messages focused on facts and key messages can help manage fear during response as well as facilitate school reopening; (ii) Information is best shared using sources judged credible by communities. In the wake of COVID19, we have seen numerous ministries of education combat misinformation campaigns. Communities are much more likely to follow guidance from sources that are nationally well known and which they consider credible, although it is important to be aware that source credibility varies among groups and even within countries; (iii) Communication channels should be selected based on their potential reach and local norms. Several methods have been proposed as channels for communicating response procedures and reopening plans. Household surveys and local norms about information acquisition can be used to determine each method's potential (Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman, 2020).

Many governments have already strengthened radio, television, and mobile communications during the crisis; these same channels could be used to deliver reopening messages among tertiary institutions by Public Relations practitioners. For instance, SMS allows for direct communication to community members at speed, and mass messaging might provide a low-cost method for providing information, encouraging compliance, and monitoring outcomes of school reopening. Several ministries of education are also using social media to communicate with parents about COVID-19, but this approach will not be suitable everywhere. Word-of-mouth via parent groups and locally nominated individuals remains an important communication channel, particularly where literacy and connectivity rates are low. Research suggests that combining multiple methods of communication could increase uptake and influence public behaviour as schools reopen. For example, television and SMS messaging can complement one another to strengthen a single strategy. Broadcasting the same information in multiple formats can make messaging more coherent. But be aware: information that is inaccurate or conflicts across modalities may lead to confusion and noncompliance with reopening plans (Carvalho, Rossiter, Angrist, Hares & Silverman, 2020).

**Targeting Resources where they are most needed:** A strong and equitable reopening and recovery requires the careful use of resources, which relies on broad coordination, effective targeting, and continual use of data to adjust and improve approaches. Policymakers will want access to evidence supporting their planning and decision making, and to draw on relevant experiences from elsewhere.

To help ensure that resources are targeted in a manner that supports a strong and equitable reopening of schools, Public Relations as part of management should: (i) Coordinate actions and resources. Under these exceptional circumstances, managing competing priorities requires coordination and exchange across organizations, which can provide incentives that strengthen implementation of reopening plans and improve efficiency; (ii) Use existing administrative and survey data to identify risk factors and guide the design of social transfer mechanisms. Community inclusion and data privacy should be prioritized at all stages; (iii) Gather high-

frequency data early and continuously throughout the reopening process to support implementation, adaptation, and learning.

**Getting Children Back to School:** Students, teachers/lecturers, and households are facing new pressures on their time and resources that will make reenrollment challenging for some families as schools reopened. Public relations as part of the management should implement Universal campaigns to encourage enrolment and consider additional measures to support the transition back to school, including cash transfers and school meals targeted to the most vulnerable. Policymakers will want to access evidence to support their planning and decision making and to draw on relevant experience from elsewhere.

To encourage and support the reenrolment of all students, public relations practitioners should: Combine community participation and large-scale direct communication campaigns to parents, and consider increasing attendance options to accommodate all children, including those with highest risk of dropping out. Provide financial or in-kind support, such as school feeding, to help families overcome the increased costs of attending school.

**Making School Environments Safe:** Maintaining the health and safety of people and environments will be more important than ever before in the aftermath of the COVID-19 school closures. To make school environments safe, additional health and hygiene measures should be implemented and school-based psychosocial and nutritional support should be extended to students to strengthen their overall health and well-being in the wake of the pandemic. Policymakers will want to access evidence to support their planning and decision-making and to draw on relevant experience from elsewhere.

To provide safe school environments following a pandemic, policymakers should: (i) Pair school-based hygiene promotion with the distribution of waterless hand sanitizer and/or soap (where handwashing stations are already available); (ii) Consider school-based screening for fever and cough, which may reduce risk and improve confidence, but which does not by itself offer a reliable solution; (iii) Train and support teachers and other school staff to offer school-based psychosocial support to returning students; (iii) Prepare for a spike in the number of students with malnutrition and other unmet basic needs.

**Recovering Learning Loss:** To address learning loss, policymakers should consider targeted programmes for accelerated recovery and use low-cost coaching and communication methods to support teachers and engage parents. Policymakers will want to access evidence to support their planning and decision making and to draw on relevant experience from elsewhere. To recover learning loss following a pandemic, policymakers should: (i) Engage students in accelerated learning interventions to reverse crisis-related learning loss and strengthen future learning trends; (ii) Engage teachers in training and coaching so they can help students catch up, and ensure that school environments are safe and protected; (iii) Engage parents by capitalizing on their current involvement in remote learning to improve future outcomes.

Nwafor, Omoevah & Umuze (2022) found in a study that the Anambra State Government, Nigeria used public relations strategies like press releases, press conferences, announcements, town hall meetings with critical stakeholders like the market unions, transport unions, town unions etc. in disseminating appropriate information and behavior that helped in managing the various COVID-19 related crises in Anambra State. For Umut, Anil & Ülfet (2020), effective

usage of digital communication contributes to the sustainability of universities during the COVID-19 crisis. The posts (text/image/poster) and videos the universities share were more concentrated on either press agency or the public information model.

In a paper presented, Musabayana (2021) underscores that PR professionals have a very critical role in the COVID19 era. Working with other communicators, they have the task of helping organisations to retain their legitimacy, not just for today, but even into the post COVID19 era. Legitimacy has great significance to the survival of institutions, as it influences consumer and citizen behaviour. PR professionals adopt diversified corporate social responsibility programmes that engage communities on the new realities, and also contribute to societal well-being; and in the process, help retain confidence in their organisations, which in this case, schools.

### **Challenges against the Application of Public Relations in the Management of Tertiary Institutions in the Post COVID-19 Lockdown Era**

The use of public relations in achieving success in organisations is without hitches. Certain challenges militate against successful application and use of public relations in achieving the organisations' success. Previous empirical and theoretical studies have shown that there are challenges in the practice of public relations in tertiary institutions. For instance, Aikins and Adu-Oppong (2015), in their study on the topic "*Using Public Relations as a Management Tool in Tertiary Institutions*" revealed that the University's public relations department is poorly resourced to perform its functions. Among the challenges as revealed in the study were scarce telecommunication equipment, lack of official means of transportation and lack of trained personnel. Furthermore, the study revealed that the public relations position is neither accorded the same status as other senior management positions nor involved adequately in decision making. Grunig suggests that one of the assumptions to be challenged is the notion that the practice of public relations focuses on a variety of key publics – shareholders, employees, suppliers, activists, the media and consumers. In many developing nations, it is the government officials rather than the general public who are most important to public relations practitioners. If government is the most important public for organisations in developing nations then this relationship will influence the practice of public relations (Taylor & Kent, 2009).

A study of staff perception of the Public Relations outfit of the University of Education (Winneba Campus), D'Almeida (2003) found out that the highest functions of Public Relations Officer among others as, receiving visitors and seeing to their wellbeing, seeing of people and welcoming them at the Airport and seeing to funeral matters. The staff of UEW however did not know that the Public Relations Officer is the mouthpiece of the University. The researcher recommended that the Public Relations Officer should be involved more in decision making and he should occupy its proper position of a Deputy Registrar in the organizational structure and must report directly to the Vice Chancellor. Again, as part of decision making, the Public Relations Officer must have the capacity to interpret the University's policies and programmes as well as coordinate students' activities and be responsible for alumni matters among others. According to Diabour (2000), public relations executives above the position of head of department level had no problems getting access to management and also being consulted frequently by management on corporate policies. Only few public executive of the status of heads of department and below enjoy that privilege. This was a finding in a study on the attitude of management towards public relations practice in ten organisations in Accra. Cutlip et al (2005) stresses the great need for improving communication channel in the University. Adam

observed in Cutlip et al (2005) that “University administrators have been compelled no more from talking about the need for communication to actually communicate with their publics.” Cutlip et al put more emphasis on the need for public relations to solve other equally important problems like those of freedom, funds and freshmen. They add that the university needs private support more than ever because there is an increased demand on government resources.

D’Almeida (2003) states that the University Relations Offices (URO) is confronted with a number of problems that hinder the effective performance of its functions. The most important of which was cash flow. Messages must be timely so they have to be sent with dispatch. However, it takes money to send kinds of messages to the relevant publics at the right time especially media and messages and advertisement for time bound events. More often than not, funds for these messages are made available to the office much later that it should be to make such messages meaningful and effective. They lack adequate resource to ensure the effect running of the office. They have no research staff, efficient phone system and depend on other offices for fax and e-mail facilities (Aikins and Adu-Opong, 2015).

In tertiary institutions, most decisions are made at the committee level which includes academics. Administrators serve as secretaries or implementers of the decisions. Since public relations practitioners who are also administrators are not privileged to be part of the decision making process, they are hardly able to comprehend the decisions made by the academics and this impedes their ability to advocate and propagate the decisions. An evaluation of the Public Relations office of some institutions found that there was need to increase public relations activities in the section. It was explained that this could be achieved only when the Public Relations section is accorded the same status as the other departments by appointing a head with similar status (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002).

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **Stakeholders Management Theory**

Stakeholders Management Theory is very relevant to this paper because the theory advocates the use of engagement through communication to create and foster meaningful relationships that are mutually beneficial between organizations and their stakeholders (Gill, 2014). According to the theory, business has become more accountable to society as many nations move to democratic models of government and conduct operations embedded in a macro-environment, which typically involves functioning in a pluralistic society that disperses power among many groups and people (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014). This has led to the evolution of organizations (and government) being accountable to multiple publics, systems and stakeholders, as opposed to business seeing its primary concern as just looking after shareholders (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014; Dickie & Dickie, 2011). Today’s businesses seek to obtain a social license to operate in their community, in contrast to the pre-classical management theories that focused on the business maximizing its output from within the environment it existed (Dickie & Dickie, 2011; KPMG, 2013).

Many theorists and writers suggest that stakeholder management is a strategic function of public relations (Doorley & Garcia 2011; Harrison 2011; Johnston and Sheehan, 2014; L’Etang 2008). But other theorists would also strongly argue that broad management responsibility plays a key role in ensuring stakeholders are engaged, informed and have a sense of importance to an

organization (Audi, 2009; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014; Dickie & Dickie, 2011; KPMG, 2013). On deeper investigation, both positions are based on the same objective relating to keeping stakeholders in a positive relationship with the organization in an effort to advance outcomes and achieve the organization's goals (Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014).

Relationship management skills are an interdisciplinary function and form the basis for knowledge transfer between management and staff, with traditional communication responsibilities managed through public relations, either through consultancy or in-house capacity (Johnston & Sheehan 2014; Audi 2009; L'Etang, 2008). Many of these stakeholder management roles have evolved into sub-roles for public relations practitioners, and typically include: employee engagement, community engagement, government relations, investor relations, and media relations (Johnston & Sheehan, 2014; Harrison, 2011; L'Etang, 2008).

Application of the principles of this theory will help tertiary institutions to achieve the desired success in their implementation of the school reopening and recovery programme(s) using public relations.

### **Excellence Theory**

Excellence Theory of public relations is another theory that is relevant to this study because of its power to explain the value of public relations to organizations and society based on the social responsibility of managerial decisions and the quality of relationships with stakeholder publics. According to the theory, for an organization to be effective, according to the theory, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as of management (→ Stakeholder Theory). If it does not, stakeholders will either pressure the organization to change or oppose it in ways that add cost and risk to organizational policies and decisions. To behave in socially acceptable ways, organizations must scan their environment to identify publics who are affected by potential organizational decisions or who want organizations to make decisions to solve problems that are important to them. Then, organizations must communicate symmetrically with publics (taking the interests of both the organization and publics into account) to cultivate high-quality, long-term relationships with them (Grunig, 1992). According to Schmitz (2014), the Excellence Theory offers 10 normative principles for achieving excellent public relations in a campaign, such as school reopening and recovery from COVID-19 pandemic:

1. Involvement of public relations in strategic management.
2. Empowerment of public relations in the dominant coalition or a direct reporting relationship to senior management.
3. Integrated public relations function.
4. Public relations as a management function, separate from other functions.
5. Public relations unit headed by a manager rather than a technician.
6. Two-way symmetrical model of public relations in practice.
7. A symmetrical system of internal communication.
8. Knowledge needed to practice the managerial role and symmetrical public relations.
9. Diversity embodied in all roles.
10. Organizational context for excellence.

## Conclusion

The prolonged lockdown occasioned by the outbreak of the COVID-Pandemic around the globe has caused unprecedented setbacks across sectors. In Nigeria, the impact of the lockdown across sectors is unimaginable or better still indescribable. In the educational sector in general and tertiary educational sector in particular, the lockdown has disrupted the teaching, learning and administrative activities, even though they were cases of online academic and administrative activities among tertiary institutions in the country, such cases were very few compared to those that were not privileged to join the online learning process. For instance, a report released by UNESCO indicates that as of 4 September 2020, approximately 1.277 billion learners were affected due to school closures in response to the pandemic, impacting on about 72.9 percent of the world's student population.

Pragmatic steps are needed to be taken to revive the sector which is badly affected by the prolonged COVID-19 lockdown, of which Public Relations which is an effective communication tool in organizations comes in handy. Subsequently, Public Relations is used as part of the management to engaging communities in reopening plans; advise the management in targeting resources to where they are most needed; getting children back to school; making school environments safe; and recovering learning loss and building back better, which is a deliberate policy for school reopening and recovery from the COVID-19.

Furthermore, the application of Public Relations in the recovery process of tertiary institutions from the COVID-19 lockdown is very necessary. However, inadequate involvement of Public Relations Unit in the decision making process on school recovery, excessive management influence on the operations of the Unit, lack of funds for the operations of the Unit, lack of professionals to handle the Unit among others can limit the success in the application of public relations in the recovery process among Nigerian tertiary institutions.

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