

## **USING PUBLIC RELATIONS AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Universities around the world have public relations offices which are created to propagate their missions. Quite often, the public relations office is charged with the responsibility of advancing the objectives of the university to enhance its corporate image. This study therefore examines the extent of practice of public relations as a tool for facilitating the achievement of the objectives of the University of Education, Winneba. Data for the study was collected from a sample of One Hundred and Fifty (150) respondents sampled from staff of the University. Findings from the study showed that the University's public relations department is poorly resourced to perform its functions. Among the challenges militating against its operations are 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. Based on the findings of the study it was recommended that the public relations unit of the University be adequately resourced and the practitioners adequately empowered.

Key words: Public Relations, Management, Communication, Information, Effectiveness

### **Introduction**

A growing trend in the corporate world is the creation of an office for corporate communications or public relations to facilitate the propagation of an organisation's mission. Quite often, the office has a cross-functional responsibility of maintaining a constant link with the public and with all functional units of an organisation including top management. Its operations vary from one organisation to another principally because of differences in

mission, vision, goals, values and the products that an organisation is established to offer its customers. It is therefore not surprising that some organisations have public relations department that operate under just one office whereas in others, you would find many units within the public relations department. In some institutions, there is a form of decentralization with a central coordinating body.

There have been various studies undertaken in the field of Public Relations in educational institutions. A lot of these studies have been centered on the Universities, which is probably because the universities deal with various publics which necessitate dissemination of information in the most appropriate manner (Veena, Dayaneethie & Zukiswo, 2012).

The purpose or functions of public relations in the administration of universities is to advance the objectives of universities as formal organisations. Public relations must therefore be geared towards achieving the organizational goals established by the university's administration. Universities relations with its public cannot be said to be the preserve of public relations practitioners alone. All members of the university, especially those in leadership, management and supervisory positions have a public relations role to play, all of which are coordinated by the public relations practitioner to inform the public with a holistic image about the university.

Over the years, universities 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 universities. 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.

Public Relations practice has become a matter of great concern to many individuals, institutions and corporate bodies in recent years. Notwithstanding the benefits of public relations to higher education, there are conflicting views about its significance to the operations of universities. This is because Public Relations officers responsible for public relations are often left out of decision-making. On several occasions, they are called in to implement some decisions that they hardly understand because they were not part of the decision making processes. They are not accorded the status that will make them part of those decisions. This gives an impression of insignificance of their function as role players in the management of Universities (Eniola, 2011).

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 relation activities in the section. It was explained that this could be achieved only when the Public Relation section is accorded the same status as the other departments by appointing a head with similar status (Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002).

In this light, one can say that for a public relations unit to function as a management tool in the administration of a university, the unit must be seen identifying problems, difficulties or needs of the publics in and around the university establishing channels for information flow, and maintaining mutual and cordial relations with the public. Public relations units are considered a necessary component in the administration of tertiary institutions particularly the university. The public relations practitioner or officer in the university should be in the capacity of a Dean and should advice management on how to position the university to enhance its public image (Ojumo, Nikona & Kiroma, 2006).

In Ghana, although educational institutions have public relations department and units, they have not been accorded the same statue as other departments. A critical look at educational institutions, reveal that just as other sections of the university play roles with specific objectives, public relations is required to perform certain responsibilities that ensure the

achievement of the goals of the institution involved. From the foregoing this study seeks to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess management's support for PR Practice in the University
2. To determine the effectiveness of UEW's PR office in reaching objectives
3. To determine the challenges militating against the effective practice of public relations in the management of the University.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Overview of Public Relations (PR)***

Public Relations (PR) practice is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation and its public (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, CIPR). 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).

### ***The Role of the Educational Public Relations Practitioner***

The role usually played by Public relations in educational institutions is to manage the flow of both internal and external communication. Public relations departments manage their organisation's reputation with various groups including internal and external publics. 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).

Today however, the role of the educational Public Relations practitioner is seen as a much broader one. Flatt (2002) listed twenty (20) roles for the contemporary public relations specialist. These leadership roles emphasized a variety of skills; 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.

### ***Role of Public Relations in Educational Institutions***

The role played by Public Relations in educational institutions is to also manage the flow of both internal and external communications. Public relations departments in educational set up do manage their organisation's reputations with various groups including internal and external publics. Seitel (2009) mentions that "Public relations practice is based on two-way communication facilitated through a multimedia approach." In reference to public relations practice in the USA, Seitel writes that Public Relations is therefore accorded a prominent role in management from a position as a Vice President with board representation. The Executive Vice President presides over specialized functional areas headed by highly placed directions that handle specific activities and publics. However, the case is different in Ghana. Public Relations do not have that opportunity.

Contrary to what exist in the USA, Public Relations practice in Ghanaian educational institutions are founded on disseminations of information usually coming from management of which the Public Relations practitioner is not part. A Public Relations Practitioner reports through a bureaucratic process as he or she is not accorded management status. In the case of University of Educations, the Public Relations officer report through the Registrar to the Vice Chancellor.

### ***Challenges in the International Public Relations Profession***

International public relations industry and its practitioners need to communicate effectively across nations and cultures. Additionally, we must keep in mind that the globalization of businesses has created needs that go beyond the standard level of proficiency and expertise required from public relations practitioners operating in their own domestic markets. In order to effectively communicate, international public relations professionals need to identify, study and understand the world view, mindsets, and habits of their global publics.

Taylor and Kent (2009), cites Grunig as suggesting that the field of public relations should “carefully examine its assumptions to understand where the field currently is, and more importantly, where the field is going” and that “one way to understand the similarities and differences in international practices is to compare the assumptions underlying each nation’s practice of public relations.”

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).

Public relations research suggests that active publics can affect organisations and their missions. The assumption behind these positions, that publics, composed of regular citizens, actually have and can exert power to influence the fate of organisations, may hold true in the United States and other Western nations where there is a history and tolerance of activism but not necessarily in other countries.

Multiple publics may be an important part of public relations communication in the developed world; but in the developing world, specific publics such as journalists and government officials may actually be more important publics. On the other hand, in other nations, government officials and bureaucrats make important decisions about licenses, contracts and business permits. Those who control access to scarce material resources may actually be the key public for practitioners in the developing world.

Although government has always been included in discussions about public relations, it is the issue management literature that most clearly identifies government as an important public to be watched and analyzed. The issue management literature shows that government can be key public for practitioners. Moreover, the relations between public relations practitioners and government officials will be partly determined by the social, political and economic development of a particular nation.

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.

The challenges for public relations practitioners in administration are evident previous studies. Public Relations can therefore not be overlooked in the management of the university. 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.

### **Case study area**

The University of Education, Winneba (UEW) is Ghana’s premier solely teacher education university. UEW was established to meet the growing demand for qualified teachers necessitated by Ghana’s educational reforms. It is a multi-campus university with four campuses spread in two regions of the country; the main campus situated at Winneba, the College of Languages Education (Ajumako Campus) in the Central Region, the College of Technology Education (Kumasi Campus) and the College of Agricultural Education (Mampong Campus) in the Ashanti Region. At UEW, the head of the University Relation Units of the UEW is a Deputy Registrar. The Deputy Registrar is supported by a team of seven member staff who coordinate information and support services during official functions such as congregation, matriculation and convocation, special events, reservation of assembly halls, conference rooms, guest accommodations and accommodations for newly appointed senior members as well as passages of management and senior members.



### **Research Methodology**

This study employed the qualitative method of inquiry using primary data to ascertain the dimensions of public relations practice at the University of Education, Winneba. Informed by this, the descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population for the study comprised Senior Members, Senior Staff and Junior Staff of UEW. The Senior Members consist of teaching and administrative professionals, all of whom have a minimum qualification of Masters Degree. The Senior Staff are middle level administrators with a first degree or higher diploma as their highest qualifications. The Junior Staff comprise all support employees whose qualifications are below a higher diploma and all other unskilled workers.

The sample for the study was selected using stratified random sampling technique. A total of One Hundred and Fifty (150) respondents were used for the study. In consonance with the percentage of the different categories of the population, 40 senior members, 30 senior staff and 80 junior staff were selected to constitute the sample size of 150. A 40-item self-administered questionnaire was used to collect data for the study.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### *Effectiveness of UEW's PR in Reaching its Public*

Table 1 shows the respondents' perception on the effectiveness of the Public Relations Department in reaching the public of the University. The mean ratings in table 1 show that the PR unit of UEW is projecting the University to its surrounding community as indicated by a rating of 2.77. The other publics that the PR unit appears to have impacted by projecting the University's goodwill and image, though ineffectively are other Tertiary Institutions ( $\bar{X} = 3.02$ ) and students of the University ( $\bar{X} = 3.05$ ).

*Table 1: Ratings of Respondents on the effectiveness of PR to the Publics of COLTEK*

<b>Category of Publics</b>	<b>Sum of Ratings (<math>\sum Fx</math>)</b>	<b>Mean Rating (<math>\sum Fx / \sum f</math>) (<math>\sum f =</math> 150)</b>	<b>Deduction</b>
Government	534	3.56	Ineffective
Media	499	3.33	Ineffective
UEW Surrounding Community	415	2.77	Effective

Research Institutions	548	3.65	Ineffective
Other Tertiary Institutions	453	3.02	Uncertain
Industries and Vendors	543	3.62	Ineffective
Pre-Tertiary Institutions	551	3.67	Ineffective
Alumni of the University	516	3.44	Ineffective
Staff of the University	516	3.44	Ineffective
Students of the University	457	3.05	Uncertain
<b>Mean of all elements of the University's Publics</b>		<b>3.379</b>	<b>Ineffective</b>

The ratings for the other publics indicate that the PR unit is yet to play its role actively in reaching out to government, the media, research institutions, industries and vendors, pre-tertiary institutions, alumni of the university and staff of the university. The overall mean of 3.379 shows that the PR unit is ineffective in reaching out to the public of the University.

*Capacity of the PR Unit to Project the University's Goodwill*

The perception of the participants in the study on the extent to which the PR unit of UEW uses different channels and tools to project the image and goodwill of the University to its publics is as shown in table 2

*Level of Collaboration between Management and PR Unit*

The degree to which management collaborates with the PR Unit to enhance their activities as perceived by the participants of the study is as shown in table 2

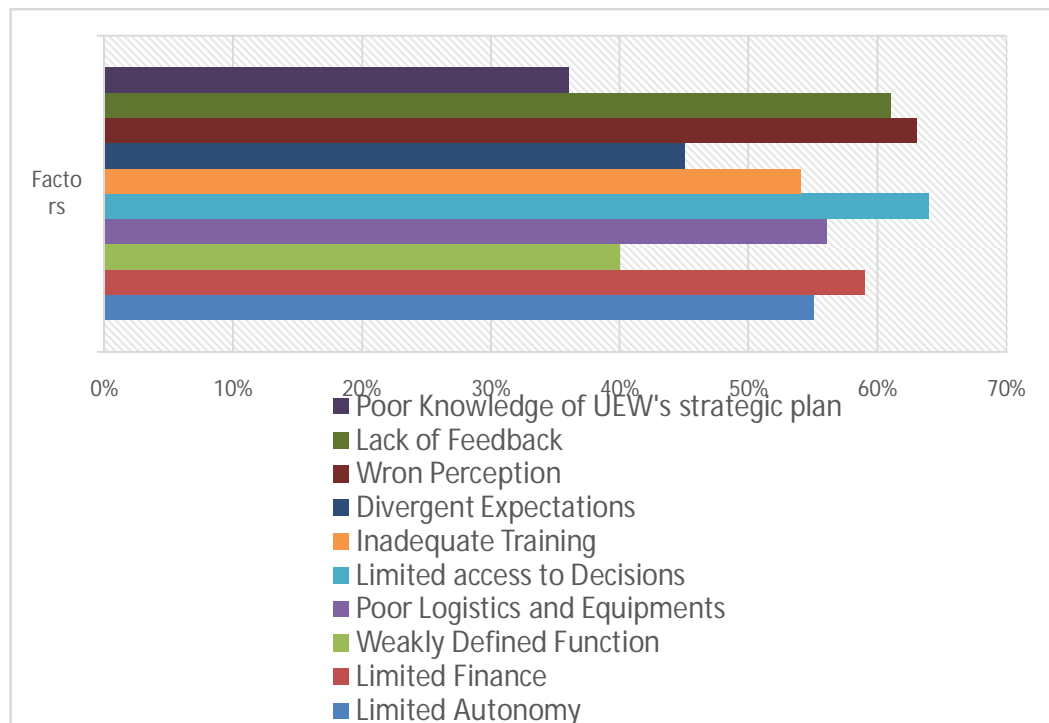
*Table 2: Management Support for PR Practice*

<b>Category of Support</b>	<b>Sum of Ratings (<math>\sum Fx</math>)</b>	<b>Mean Rating (<math>\frac{\sum Fx}{\sum f}</math>) (<math>\sum f = 150</math>)</b>	<b>Deduction</b>
PR-role and schedule is defined.	400	2.47	Agree
Effective PR depends on elevated status of the office.	423	2.82	Agree
PR practitioners should be part of top management decisions.	429	2.86	Uncertain
Management's exclusive use of PR unit for promoting UEW's goodwill.	431	2.87	Uncertain
Management's consistent use of PR unit for liaison and coordination of stakeholder concerns.	393	2.62	Agree
<b>Mean for all categories of support</b>		<b>2.72</b>	<b>Agree</b>

In table 2, the overall mean rating of 2.72 shows that there is a general consensus on the need for strong management support for, and collaboration with the PR unit. The mean ratings suggest that the schedule of the PR unit is defined by management ( $\bar{x} = 2.47$ ). There is also the notion that elevating the position of the PR practitioner will promote effective PR ( $\bar{x} = 2.82$ ). The mean rating of 2.62 again suggests that the PR unit is under-utilized to coordinate the concerns of the various stakeholders of the University. Notwithstanding, the mean values of 2.86 and 2.87 suggest that as many of the respondents that agree, also disagree on the inclusion of PR practitioners in top management decision and their exclusive use for promoting the goodwill of the University.

#### *Challenges Militating Against Effective PR Practice*

The factors impeding the effective practice of Public Relations as a tool for advancing the goals of UEW as perceived by the participants of the study as well as the proportion of the participants that affirm the factors as impediments to PR practice are as shown in figure 1



**Fig 1: Factors militating against the effective practice of PR**

The distribution of the responses in fig. 1 shows that as much as 64% of the respondents agreed with the notion that the practice of PR at UEW is impeded by limited access to management decision. Similarly as much as 63% of the respondents agree that there are wrong perceptions about the relevance of PR in promoting the goodwill of public universities. It is also believed by 61% of the respondents that PR activities are impeded by lack of feedback on PR practice. The other factors believed to impede PR activities and the proportion of the respondents making the assertions are limited finance (59%), poor logistics and equipment (56%), limited autonomy of practitioners (55%) and inadequate training of practitioners (54%).

From the responses it appears that factors like poor knowledge of the University's strategic plan (36%), weakly defined PR functions (40%) and divergent expectations between PR office and management (45%) have little impact on the effective practice of PR.

### **Discussions**

The results of the study are discussed in relation to the objectives of the study as a way of providing answers to the research questions used for the study. The first objective sought to explore ways by which the Public Relations Unit advances the objectives of the University of Education, Winneba. Of the ten (10) different publics identified as targets for projection and promotion of the image, goodwill and goals of UEW, the results of the study suggest that the PR unit is reaching out mostly to the surrounding community of the University and perhaps to students of the university and other tertiary institutions. Advocacy of the activities of the university to government, media, research institutions, industries and vendors, pre-tertiary institutions, alumni of the university and staff of the university are yet to be fully exploited and used to advance the goals of the university and promote its image.

Secondly, the findings of the study showed that the PR unit is effective and involved in using events and promoting access to the university's facilities as a means of enhancing the image of the University and projecting the University to its publics. Notwithstanding, PR practitioners of the University are yet to fully exploit the opportunities available in using channels like radio, TV and print media as well as tools like research to advance the goals of the institution.

The second objective sought to find out the extent of management collaborating with the public relations office to maximize their impact on the University's ability to achieve its goals. The findings of the study indicate some level of support for PR practice, though not adequate enough to engender innovative and pragmatic practice of the public relations. For example, the respondents agree that the PR department is well informed about its role, functions and schedule. They however believe that the effectiveness of the PR office is dependent on elevation of the status of the office, inclusion of the office in top management decision making and empowerment of the office to function as the exclusive means of promoting the goodwill of the University and coordinating/integrating the concerns of its different stakeholders. The responses of the respondents seem to suggest that management is yet to fully empower the office to live up to its mandate and aid the achievement of the University's objectives.

The final objective sought to find the challenges faced by Public Relations practitioners in UEW. The results of the study show that the greatest challenges to effective PR practice are limited access to top management decisions, wrong perceptions about the usefulness of PR in public Universities, lack of feedback on how the PR office is performing. Lack of autonomy and finance as well as poor logistics and inadequate training were also identified as impediments to effective PR practice. The combination of these factors evidently must have contributed to low enthusiasm of PR practitioners to make a great impact on the goodwill of the university. All of these suggest that the PR department is yet to be well empowered to perform its functions effectively.

## **Conclusion**

Findings of the study suggests that the public relations department of UEW is underutilized and is performing a role that is below the ideal strategic functions of public relations in bonding a University with its publics. A number of reasons can be inferred from the study to explain this conclusion. Findings of the study suggests that the inability of the unit to bond the University with most of its strategic stakeholders is likely due to the limited autonomy enjoyed by the unit and its limited involvement in top management decisions. It is also very likely that the unit is unable to utilize different varieties of tools to project the University to most of its publics owing to lack of managerial support in terms of logistics supply, training

and finance. The findings also suggest that notwithstanding knowledge of its functions and the University's strategic plan, the PR unit is unable to devise different means of advancing the goals of the University by acting effectively as the mouthpiece of the University probably due to its low status. Again, the enthusiasm and commitment of PR practitioners of the University is likely to have been stifled by lack of feedback on their performance and the general culture/perception that PR practice in public universities is insignificant for projecting the goals of such universities.

In view of this, it is suggested that the PR unit should be given a higher status that makes it accountable directly to the office of the Vice Chancellor. This will give practitioners the opportunity to be part of top management decisions, and thus in turn will enable the unit to understand the vision of the University. The unit should also be given an official means of transportation, equipment to facilitate information communication and management and an office with schedule officers for different PR functions. Finally, personnel of the PR unit should be trained periodically to acquire the conceptual knowledge and technical skills required to relate effectively with the different publics of the University.

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