

**PERCEPTION OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS ON ETHICAL  
PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN EBONYI STATE  
UNIVERSITY, ABAKALIKI, NIGERIA**

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**Abstract**

In every organization, Public Relations serve as vital anchor that keeps its reputation and external relationships afloat. It is a shield that minimizes risk and damage upon progress, initiating robust growth and evolution. The rationale for this study is that every successful public relations activities is guided by certain moral principles and is geared towards ensuring that the communication needs of all key stakeholders are addressed. These obviously include the postgraduate students of Ebonyi State University who constitute a critical component of the university publics. Besides, in building reputation of an organization, it has to start from internal publics. It is against this backdrop that it becomes imperative to assess the practice of ethical public relations as perceived by postgraduate students among the university staff in Ebonyi State University. The objectives were to determine whether Ebonyi State University postgraduate students perceive the level of communication flow between the students and staff is highly commendable; ascertain the level of goodwill elicited from postgraduate students and as well determine the major challenges that confront the postgraduate students. The study was anchored on two-way symmetrical model. Mixed research method was adopted for this study and data were gathered using questionnaire and indepth interview of staff of public relations unit of Ebonyi State University. The population of the study consists of 990 post graduate students in the 9 faculties of the university between 2018 to 2022 academic session. The population comprises 88 PGD, 540 Masters and 362 PhD. A sample of 285 respondents was chosen for the study based on Australian sample size online calculator. The findings of the study revealed that poor communication and inadequate feedback mechanism have posed serious challenge on ethical practice of public relations in Ebonyi State University. It was therefore recommended that in order to build and enhance healthy relationships between the university and her postgraduate students, it is vital to find innovative ways to communicate with the postgraduate students to keep them not only engaged but informed.

**Keywords:** Perception, Ethical Public Relations, Postgraduate student, Appraisal, University.

**Introduction**

Every profession demands sincerity and devotion following certain

written and unwritten rules of conduct. In the professional world - whether it is medical, engineering or law - the respective graduates take an oath to abide by the professional ethics before entering the field. It is believed that professionalism and ethics are inextricably linked, especially in areas like Public Relations which affect human decisions, behaviour and the condition of society. According to Barlik, Ewa, Oledzky and Wojcik (2020), Public relations should reconcile the interests of clients, media representatives, and various groups within our society, while complying with ethical standards and referring to such values as respect, dignity, reliability, honesty, truth, credibility, independence, loyalty and trust.

Vesely (2019) states that while ethics and compliance movement continue to gain attraction in organizations around the globe, its origin can be traced to the United States. Likewise, the 1986 Defense Industry Initiative which was formed by 18 of the nation's top defense companies to develop written code of ethics for their employees fueled the growth of ethics and compliance function in other industries (Vesely2019). The author further maintains that the development and the implementation of the Federal Sentencing Guidelines for Organizations in 1991 provided additional incentive for United States Organisations to create ethics and compliance programs by establishing a uniform sentencing policy for individuals and organizations convicted of compliance-related felonies and serious misdemeanor.

However, it was not until the start of the new millennium that organizations in other nations around the world began to place stronger emphasis on ethics and compliance. Possible reasons include the proliferation of International business interests and activities that have fostered the growth of a more global-centric economy, ramped-up efforts to combat fraud and bribery perpetuated by U.S based business partners and the need for closer scrutiny regarding how organizations were conducting business with other countries in general (Syntrio,2019).

Today, universities have adopted professional public relations activities owing to rapid expansion of its environments, increase in staff and students population and the changing social issues that they deal with. In an interview with Patrick Itumo, the Public Relations Officer of the University under study, the researchers observe that Ebonyi State University also known as EBSU is one of the state-owned universities in Nigeria and that it is an academic institution created to expand admissions and bring professional skills, expertise and modern research facilities closer to the city and rural dwellers. Accordin to him, EBSU has helped talented students to obtain higher education. He said that Ebonyi State University was born in 1999 using the Enugu State University of Science and Technology (ESUT) as a

springboard. The major landmark that launched the institution/ college to her present status came in 1999 under the establishing law (Ebonyi State University Law No 7, 1999) when his Excellency, Dr. Sam Ominyi Egwu, first Executive Governor of Ebonyi State, announced the upgrading of the University College to a full-fledged multi-disciplinary University. He further stated that the Public Relations Unit was established alongside the University.

The Public Relations Unit of EBSU is the extension of the management's responsibility for enhancing the school's image before its internal and external publics. Its duty was to provide public services in the interest of Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria. It then follows that the postgraduate students of the university who hail from different parts of the country and beyond, constitute a critical component of the university publics. These students interact with the university community through the various offices, directorates and schools in the course of pursuing their respective programmes. In so doing, they meet different officers of the university who handle and attend to them in different manners, approaches, behaviour, characters and attitudes. Consequently, it becomes imperative that a study should be undertaken to ascertain the level of goodwill and positive image the university has built in the minds of postgraduate students through the services of her employees.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Ebonyi State University Abakaliki as a corporate organization is ever conscious and striving to build and nurture her public's goodwill, positive image and mutual understanding. Incidentally, the postgraduate students of the university constitute an important part of the university's publics. It is certain that the way these postgraduate students perceive the university is a matter of serious concern to the university management and the government of Ebonyi State that owns the school. The postgraduate students relate with the university through her staff members (both academic and non-academic staff) working in different offices. The University seeks goodwill, rapport and mutual understanding from its publics. In line with this, only a few studies like the one carried out by Udu, (2012) has investigated the relationship between universities and their postgraduate students. However, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, no empirical attempt has been made to probe into postgraduate students' perception of Ebonyi State University ethical public relations practices, hence, the knowledge gap that this study seeks to fill.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The general objective of this study is to determine Ebonyi State University postgraduate students' perception of ethical public relations practices among the university staff while the specific objectives are to:

1. determine whether Ebonyi State University postgraduate students perceive the level of communication flow between the students and staff as highly commendable.
2. ascertain whether the public relations practices of Ebonyi State University elicit the goodwill of her postgraduate students.
3. determine whether staff of Ebonyi State University request for gratification as a condition for attending to postgraduate students request

### **Research Questions**

This study will be guided by the following research questions:

1. Do the students of Ebonyi State University perceive the level of communication flow between students and staff as highly commendable?
2. Do the public relations practices of Ebonyi State University staff elicit the goodwill of her postgraduate students?
3. Do the staff of Ebonyi State University request for gratification as a condition for attending to postgraduate students request?

### **Review of related literature**

#### **Concept of Public Relations Practice**

Public relations practice is a practical phenomenon that cannot be separated from the realities of existential contemporary human existence (Ogbaeja and Nwankwo, 2019). The authors affirmed that public relations has not just come to stay but has continued to touch and affect virtually all aspects, units and segments of human activities or areas of occupation and operation. This is true because all kinds of organizations are realizing the values of public relations practice (Elem 2018 as cited in Ogbaeja and Nwankwo 2019).

Public relations practice is a distinctive management function which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual and organization with the public interest, plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. In addition, it entails monitoring, assessing, managing and evaluating public reactions, perceptions, views and opinions on organizational policies and programmes of action (Nweze 2015 as cited in Ogbaeja & Nwankwo 2019).

### **Perception of Ethical Public Relations Practice**

According to Fitch (2013), Public Relations is often perceived as unethical, yet professional associations and educators position the industry as an ethical profession. In their own view, Edwards and Hodges (2011), posit that the dominant paradigm for public relations positions it as a managerial, functionalist practice that serves organizational interest although a recent socio-cultural 'turn' in public relations emphasizes its communicative, dialogue and broader societal role. Bowen (2006), also adds that although Public relations industry actively seeks recognition as a socially responsible and ethical profession, a U.S industry-funded study of practitioners found that 30% has had no mention of ethics in their university studies and another 40% only had a few readings or lectures.

Al Jenaibi (2015) is of the view that the worst misconception about PR is that it contains no ethics; anything goes as long as it promotes or protects the company's interest, or helps achieve its objectives. In this case, the author regards it as an unfair indictment of the profession. Hallahan (2004) stated that though some PR professionals are unscrupulous that most are similar to other professionals. On this, Hallahan (2004) argues that condemning a person due to his/her profession is stereotyping. Al Jenaibi (2015) equally argues that despite the fact that PR profession is commonly being accused of trying to corrupt the media, politicians and government authorities through bribery, it could back fire because the truth is usually discovered at the end.

### **Public Relations Practice in the University**

Universities around the world have public relations units to manage their communication and propagate their missions (Adu-Oppong 2015.) The unit plays an important role in how employees, investors and the general public see a university. They create an avenue for effective communication between managers and stakeholders of the institution. Often, these offices' several responsibilities aid in the advancement of the objectives of the university to enhance its corporate image. However, their functions and operations vary from one university to another, mainly because of differences in vision, mission, goals and values (Aikins and Adu-Oppong 2015)

Public Relations play a vital role in helping university administrators to show clearly their aspirations, goals and objectives in order to operate and compete. Its operations differ from one university to another mainly because of differences in mission, vision, goals, values and services that a university was established for (Aikins & Adu-Oppong, 2015).

The peculiarity of a university environment lies in the fact that it consists basically of a conglomeration of highly educated, awkward and independent minded academics, a crew of administrative staff and mainly students in their youthful ages (Udu, 2012). Furthermore, the university public relations officer has the task to advise, meditate and harmonize issues in such a professional manner that promotes understanding and peaceful coexistence within the community.

In the case of some universities not giving the public relations officer a free hand to perform his/her professional duties, Udu (2012) agree that the extent of freedom the public relations officer enjoys in his/her duties is often dependent on such factors as the disposition of the Chief Executive (Vice Chancellor), the level of publicity profile the VC allows, his/her perception of public relations, the extent of trust and confidence reposed on the PRO, level of his political mindedness, prejudices, administrative style, among others.

### **Code of Ethics**

Code of ethics is a guide or principles designed to help professionals conduct business honestly and with integrity (Hayes, 2021). Similarly, ethical codes are adopted by organisations to assist members in understanding the difference between right and wrong in applying that understanding to their decisions. Typically, a code of ethics outlines the mission and values of the business or organization, the approach professionals are supposed to take when they encounter a problem, the organization's core values and the ethical principle they are based on, as well as standards to which all professionals are held (Hayes, 2022).

Seitel (2007) observes that a code may be a short mission statement, or it may be a sophisticated document that requires compliance with articulated standards and has a complicated enforcement mechanism. He further explains that it is a formal statement of the values and business practices of a corporation. Ethical rules and professional conduct outline the ethical principles that govern decisions and behaviour at a company or organization (Betterteam, 2021). He adds that they give general outlines of how employees should behave, as well as specific guidance for handling issues like harassment, safety, and conflicts of interest. Ethical codes of conduct contain general principles and ethical standards of conduct that guide the behavior of a public relations professional.

In his words, Brainhub (2022) opines that code of ethics sets the right culture whereby it can foster any environment of trust, ethical behavior, integrity and excellence. According to the him, when everyone from the

management to the people at the bottom, plays by the rules and behaves in a certain way, productivity tends to grow as conflicts and confusion disappear from workplace. He also adds that any organisation that sets this culture is better equipped to deal with unforeseen challenges because they have a very strong foundation to stand on, establish lasting partnerships both within and outside their organisations.

Similarly, code of ethics helps organisations remain in compliance with the laws and regulations (Brainhub, 2022).

The demand for a common code of conduct for the PR practitioners was realized as far back as 1965 when the international PR organizations gave the issue of ethics a serious thought (IPRA, 2001). The International Public Relations Association at Athens, Greece on May 12, 1965 adopted a draft of an International Code of Ethics for public relations practice. The Code had been an object of the nascent IPRA since 1952 and was to become a major promotional strategy of the organisation from the mid-1960s onwards. Largely written by the French public relations leader Lucien Matrat (IPRA 2001), it followed an earlier IPRA Code of Conduct (known as the Code of Venice) and was adopted wholly or in a modified form by many public relations professional associations in subsequent years (IPRA, 1994).

All organizations need public relations activities because it is the focal point of organizational interaction with its various publics. Public Relations strive to establish, maintain and sustain mutual understanding or co-existence between an organization and its varied publics by building a solid platform for cordial relationship. No wonder Black (1989) says that public relations is a "Bridge builder", However, two definitions that have gained universal acceptance are the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) which describes PR as deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics; and that of International Public Relations Association (IPRA) which defined it as the art and science of analyzing trends, predicting the consequences, counseling organizational leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization and public interest is identified as the Mexican Statement of 1978 (Nigerian Tribune, 2001).

Going by these two definitions, the public relations practitioner is a core reputation manager and more. Public relations involve being deliberate, planning and sustenance of actions that will make for cordial relationship between the organization and its publics so as to achieve organizational goal. Bearing in mind that the publics of an organization are the group of people who follow the issues related to the organization (Hung 2007). Ayodele (1999) posits that the professionals in this field take actions that will

influence their publics positively in favour of the establishment or organization.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the two-way symmetrical model of communication, an approach to public relations which was developed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984. This model focuses on dialogue that creates and sustains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its key stakeholders. This model tries to minimize the potential imbalance of power between organisations and relevant publics found in the asymmetrical model of public relations and embraces a broader social responsibility perspective.

Grunig, 2006) says that the roots for this model represents a movement away from theories of attitudes held by one person and research on how to develop messages to change the orientations (attitudes) of another person. This model is different in comparison to the stereotypical view of the PR practitioner as a manipulative figure who uses smoke and mirrors to control audiences. The symmetrical model proposed that individuals, organisations, and publics should use communication to adjust their ideas and behaviour to those of others rather than try to control how others think and behave (Grunig, 2006).

This approach is particularly suitable for analyzing communication between Ebonyi State University postgraduate students and the university staff because it offers an ethical and democratically necessary way to communicate about services that affect the public's vital interests. Such communication can add great value to decisions affecting public interests and can create agreement and lasting partnerships among the Ebonyi State University postgraduate students and the university staff.

### **Method of Data Collection**

Data was collected from 285 respondents through face-to-face method. With the use of group discussions and oral interviews, the copies of the questionnaire distributed to the postgraduate students and staff of public relations unit of Ebonyi State University were complemented.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The collected data were presented in simple frequency tables, percentages and analyzed with the use of descriptive methods.

### **Results / Findings**

From the 285 copies of questionnaire distributed, 277 were properly

filled and returned.

**Table 1:** Programme of study

| Response Category | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| PGD               | 48         | 17.3       |
| Diploma           | 0          | 0          |
| M.Sc./M.A         | 147        | 53.0       |
| M.Sc./PhD         | 12         | 4.3        |
| PhD               | 70         | 25.2       |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>277</b> | <b>100</b> |

*Author's field survey, 2022*

Table 1 shows that a greater number of respondents are pursuing their M.Sc./M.A degrees.

**Table 2:** The period I have spent in a particular postgraduate programme is:

| Response Category | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Less than 1 year  | 30         | 10.8       |
| 1 year            | 22         | 7.9        |
| 2 years           | 43         | 15.5       |
| 3 years           | 81         | 29.2       |
| 4 years and above | 101        | 36.2       |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>277</b> | <b>100</b> |

*Author's field survey, 2022*

Table 2 shows that greater percentage of the respondents have already studied at Ebonyi State University for 3 years and 4 years and above respectively.

**Table 3:** The level of communication flow between EBSU postgraduate students and staff as perceived by the postgraduate students

| Response Category | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Never             | 30         | 10.8       |
| Rarely            | 111        | 40.0       |
| Sometimes         | 76         | 27.4       |
| Almost everytime  | 39         | 14.0       |
| Everytime         | 21         | 7.5        |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>277</b> | <b>100</b> |

*Author's field survey, 2022*

Table 3 shows that the communication flow between the postgraduate students of Ebonyi State University and the university staff is poor.

**Table 4:** Ebonyi State University through her staff has always kept you abreast of needed information and directive to guide the success of your programme

| Response Category | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-------------------|------------|------------|
| Strongly Agree    | 130        | 46.9       |
| Agree             | 67         | 24.1       |
| Undecided         | 30         | 10.8       |
| Disagree          | 33         | 11.9       |
| Strongly Disagree | 17         | 6.1        |
| <b>Total</b>      | <b>277</b> | <b>100</b> |

*Author's field survey, 2022*

Table 4 indicates that the staff of EBSU have been providing the needed information and directive for their postgraduate students. This implies that the postgraduate students rely on the staff for information.

**Table 5:** The University communicates and relate with her postgraduate students through various channels

| Response Category                   | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Radio/Television                    | 3          | 1.0        |
| Phone call/Text message             | 93         | 33.5       |
| Course Representative/ Notice board | 107        | 38.6       |
| Newspaper/ Magazine                 | 2          | 0.7        |
| Social media                        | 39         | 14.0       |
| Workshop                            | 33         | 11.9       |
| <b>Total</b>                        | <b>277</b> | <b>100</b> |

*Author's field survey, 2022*

Table 5 indicates the various means through which Ebonyi State

University communicate with its relevant publics of which the postgraduate students are one.

### **Discussion of Findings**

This study accessed Ebonyi State University postgraduate students' perception of ethical public relations practices in the university from 2018-2022. One of the finding of this study reveals that the staff of Ebonyi State University have commendable relationship with the postgraduate students. That the staff do not request for gratification as a condition for attending to postgraduate students request and that is commendable however, there is need to improve on their communication as it was discovered that communication flow between the postgraduate students of the university and the university staff is poor. Edwards and Hodges (2011), argument that the dominant paradigm for public relations positions it as a managerial, functionalist practice that serves organizational interest although a recent socio-cultural 'turn' in public relations emphasizes its communicative, dialogue and broader societal role is in line with the finding of the study.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, the following measures are hereby recommended in line with the objective.

- 1) Ebonyi State University management should make it a priority to improve its culture of communication, whether through additional management training or upskilling to maintain an open line of communication for faster, wider and easier reach.
- 2) Attention should be given to regular training and retraining of members of staff to be better equipped them to cope with the challenges of ethical public relations practice and to enhance their performance and productivity.
- 3) Since the staff of Ebonyi State University do not request for gratification as a condition for attending to postgraduate students request, that attitude should be maintained.

### **Conclusion**

Ebonyi State University postgraduate students perceive the level of communication flow between them and the staff as not highly commendable although the public relations practice of EBSU elicit the goodwill of her postgraduate students due to other measures in place. The finding of this study reveal that the staff of Ebonyi State University do not request for gratification as a condition for attending to postgraduate students request and

that is a good virtue that attracts the goodwill the school enjoys.

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