

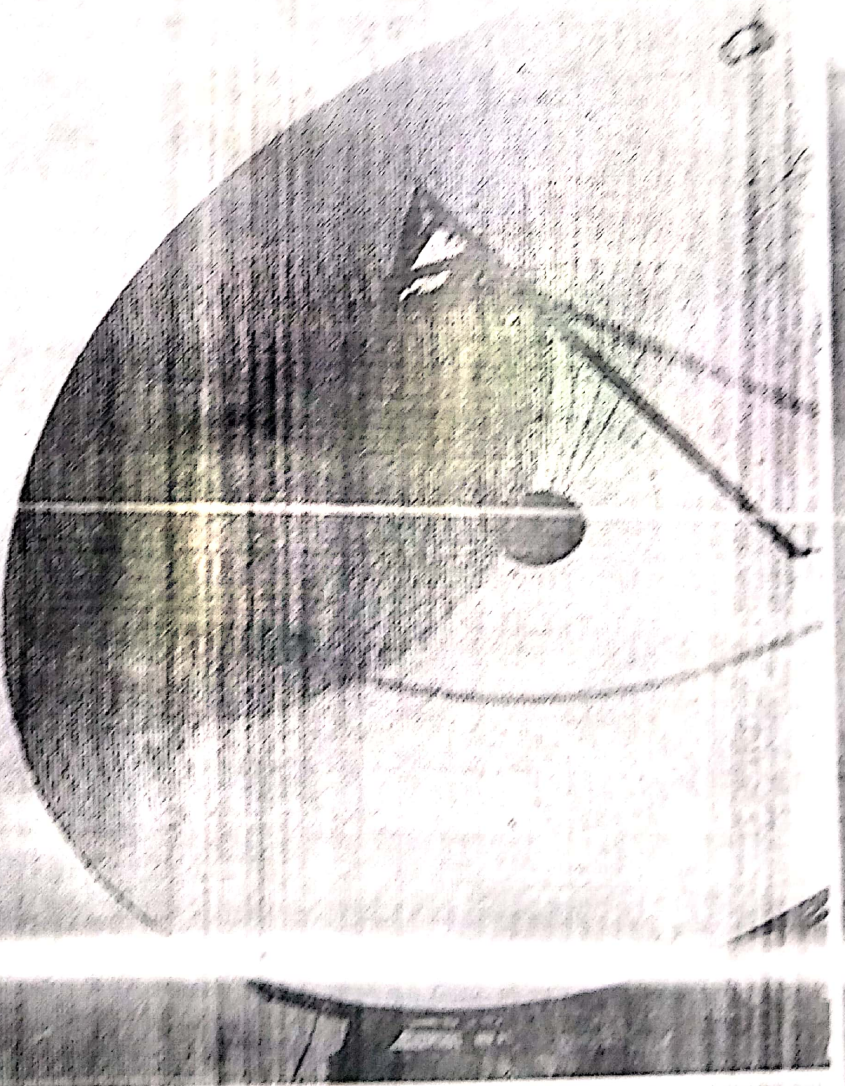
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## **ASSESSMENT OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGIES IN HANDLING THE JANUARY 2007 STUDENTS' CRISIS AT DELTA STATE POLYTECHNIC, OGWASHI-UKU, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study was aimed at among other things assessing the public relations strategies used by the management of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku (DSPG) to manage the January 2007 student's crisis in the institution. It also examined the reasons for the poor relationship between the students and management. The survey research method was used. Personal interviews and a self-administered questionnaire were used as research instruments to elicit information from respondents. Simple percentages were used to analyze data gathered. Findings show that public relations is not accorded its rightful place as a management function in the institution. Consequently, half-measure, fire-alarm strategies were employed by the polytechnic's management to douse the students' protest. These were highly ineffective and although the students' protest ended ultimately, the negative media reports of the event caught management napping, leading to hush-hush rebuttals after the damage had been done. The study identified inadequate communication as well as communication breakdown as the main catalysts to the crisis.. The paper, therefore, suggested that DSPG and other higher institutions in the country should recognize the vital role PR plays in the overall performance of organizations. They were, therefore, urged to adopt a policy of effective and efficient PR practice as an indispensable management function.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

One of the goals of management, whether it is that of a business venture, a higher institution or a government establishment is the prevention and management of unexpected events – planning for disaster. One of such unexpected events is an industrial action, crisis or conflict. Conflicts between social groups are a sign of some sort of hostility between them. Crisis has been defined by the Webster's English Dictionary as “ a turning point for better or worse” This is to say that there is a decisive moment and a very crucial time in the management of any organisation.

Salu (1994:383) citing Newsom (1975) differentiated between two types of crises, the violent and non-violent. The violent crisis is cataclysmic, immediate, involving loss of life or property, while the non-violent crisis may be sudden and involve upheaval, damages and tends to be less catastrophic and immediate. Utomi (1994) holds that many people make the mistake of assuming that businesses are just organizations set up to maximize profit in the production and exchange of values for their owners. Most of them neglect the salient point that modern businesses, organizations and, of course, educational institutions have as one of

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their primary objectives, continuing to be in business and existence. Since crisis can stop them from achieving this, the function of managers, therefore, includes preventing crises. One of the ways to prevent crisis is the employment of effective public relations practices and programmes.

Organizations including higher institutions of learning should therefore be proactive. They should get involved in issues management. They should be able to identify those issues that might result into crisis. For instance, problems like water shortage, poor transportation, high school fees and improper handling of students' complaints are likely to result in crises. Management should therefore adopt a proactive, instead of a reactive approach. There should be a two-way flow of communication from the students to management and from management to the students, which can promote cordial and mutual understanding. This is where good public relations come in.

Public relations is no doubt an indispensable tool in the management of both public and private sector organizations. In the same vein, public relations can play a central role in achieving specific objectives at all levels in tertiary institution by focusing, reinforcing, and communicating effective messages (Socze, 2006). Many scholars have defined public relations to suit and make meaning to their publics. According to Benson-Eluwa (1999), the most acceptable definition is that of the British Institute of Public Relations (IPR), which states that "public relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. This means that public relations is an on-going thing, not a reaction to a particular situation, or an accidental thing. It is not "a shot in the arm", but a course of treatment for organizational problems. It must be planned and deliberate.

According to Okoro, Udeze and Agbo (1999:3) public relations practice can be summarized as follows:

- Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes, future trends and issues which might be relevant to any section of the corporate organization.
- Counseling management in all the departments within the organization.
- Establishing and maintaining two-way communication between the organization and its various publics in order to win co-operation.

The business of running any organization administratively today will, therefore, not be complete without public relations as a prominent component. Nwachukwu (2006:1), citing Wilson (2005) says... it is a management function, which attempts to

- Maintain favourable public attitudes;
- Foster greater public understanding and acceptance of procedures and policies;
- Identify each institution with public interest through a sustained programme of interpersonal and mass communication.

Emphasizing further the importance of public relations as a management function, Salu (1994: 238-239) states that PR functions, among other things, include: "preventing conflicts and misunderstanding; promoting goodwill with external and internal publics such as staff.

students... and promoting good employee relations". Public relations can, therefore, be effectively used for the prevention and management of crisis in any higher institution.

Crisis in universities and other tertiary institutions in Nigeria have been a recurring decimal. These crises sometimes result to loss of students' lives, destruction of school properties and, at times, those of innocent law abiding citizens. In some cases, students are kept out of school for a whole academic session or even more. It will not be out of place, therefore, to assume that one of the major causes of a lot of these crises is poor relationship between the students and the institution's authorities due to lack of proper and effective communication.

Nworgu (2005: 200) citing Cherrington (1994) said that according to the "Interaction Conflict theory" the hostility of each group is a function of the underlying grievance and the level of hostility of the group. Hostility between groups, he said, was dependent on the reaction of each group to the behavior of the other. Indeed, the nature of relationship between the two groups determines how they react to each other. The level of interaction and the effectiveness of communication between groups can thus determine the likelihood of conflict or harmony within an organization.

#### **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku, located in Delta State of Nigeria, like other higher institutions, has had its own fair share of crisis between the students and school authorities. On November 18, 2002, the Delta State government presented the final application for the establishment of polytechnics in the state to the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE). One of these polytechnics is the Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku. On January 22, 2002 – approximately two months later – the pioneer students of the Delta State Higher Education Project (DSHEP) were formally invited for orientation activities at their respective polytechnics campuses at Ogwashi-Uku, Ozoro and Oghara, and the College of Physical Education, Mosogar (Okobiah 2003:1).

Okobiah (2003) further said that there are three existentially epoch-making occasions in the life of any student in any educational institution. These are:

- Admission after various selection mechanics;
- Matriculation after critical examination and certification of the integral qualification parameters and the student is formally and legally admitted to read and study a corporate set of curricula designed for a certification in designated field of specialization; and,
- Convocation, which marks the ceremonial admission of the student into the corporate body of the designate professions and academics.

Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku has experienced the first two but there has not been any formal convocation ceremony. Like other young higher institution of learning, it is going through a lot of teething problems of office accommodation, lecture room spaces for the growing number of students, transportation, hostel facilities, water shortage, electricity and a host of others, which are not peculiar to the polytechnic. The problem however is how management has been able to handle these situations. Have they been able to get the

understanding of the students through effective communication? Have there been constant dialogues between management and the students' representatives? How effective have been the students' affairs office and the public relations unit? These, and other related questions beg for answers.

In March 2004, the students of the polytechnic embarked on a protest – the first in the life of the institution and their grievances included lack of water and electricity. They also complained that the then Students' Affairs officer seized the mobile phones of some students because of the allegation that they had been watching blue movies. Sometime between August and September 2006, a crisis that would have erupted as a result of the late payment of SIWES (Industrial Training Allowance) was averted. Others prevented were those that would have resulted as a result of the termination of the appointments of two lecturers and the issues of students' preference for carry-over, over re-sit examinations.

The most recent one, which is the focus of the study, took place on Thursday, January 18<sup>th</sup> 2007, when students of the polytechnic barricaded the major road leading to all the campuses of the institution. Their complaints, among other things, included inadequate buses for transportation, high examination grading system, non-release of the student welfare committee account and lack of essential services, such as phone booths and photocopying centres in the school. Although management later sorted things out in a meeting with the students' representatives, the Nigeria Television Authorities (NTA), Asaba went on air in the evening, that the polytechnic had been closed down without attributing their story to any source. This was most embarrassing to say the least, and the institution's authorities had to immediately refute the story.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

The objectives of the study, therefore, include:

- To determine the level of communication between the students, and the institution's authorities.
- To ascertain whether the management of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku consider public relations as a vital tool for organizational management and survival.
- To examine what public relations strategies the polytechnic's management adopted in the management of the January 2007 Students' protest.
- To assess the strength and weaknesses of these PR strategies in the management of institutional crisis, both internal and external.
- To examine covert and overt reasons behind the announcement of the closure of the institution by NTA Asaba.
- To determine how public relations activities can help educational institutions maintain internal harmony and achieve greater performance.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

This study will, no doubt, enhance the understanding of areas of conflict between the management of tertiary institutions, particularly the new ones, and students in the country, thereby helping to promote the prevention and resolution of such conflicts. It is a veritable

contribution to the growing body of literature on conflict management in institutions of higher learning. The management, students and other publics of these institutions will find this study vital to organizational harmony. This is, more so, because the study will:

- Highlight the areas of conflict between the management of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku and the students, as applicable to similar institutions of higher learning.
- Recommend strategies for establishing cordial relationship between the polytechnic's administration and students.
- Identify the appropriate media for effective communication between the school's management and students.
- Ascertain the crisis management strategies of the institution's management.
- Help to improve communication and cordial relationship between the students and management.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study will, among other things, also try to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. How regularly are the students exposed to information about activities in the Polytechnic from management?
2. Is the public relations department of school playing the role it is supposed to play?
3. What are the major causes of crisis between the student and the school authorities?
4. How do students get their information about the school activities?
5. Have the school's authorities been proactive or reactive on issues of crisis management?

#### COMMUNICATION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Osemwota (2006) is of the opinion that organizational conflicts or crises tend to derive from any of the following:

- Organizational Resource Management
- Leadership styles
- Struggle for power between the individual and groups
- Conflict arising from communication barriers or breakdown.
- Role conflicts
- Structural conflicts
- Institutional conflicts.

Relevant to this study here is "conflict" or "crisis" arising from communication barriers or breakdown. Elaborating on this, Osemwota (2006) said further that communication barrier or breakdown occurs when organizational members do not understand each other or are unable or unwilling to communicate with each other. This is generally an offshoot of misunderstanding in the communication process. This could be due to problems of semantics, physical barriers, psychological barriers or hoarding of information. A natural bad blood

among the parties may also result to communication breakdown. One major way to solve the problem of communication barrier or breakdown is through good and effective public relations practice.

The importance of communication in a crisis situation can never be overemphasized. Ulmer (2006) explains that communication prior to a crisis has an impact on post crisis communication and emphasized the importance of establishing strong communication channels and positive value positions with stakeholders well before crisis erupts. This goes further to reinforce the fact that establishing good communication channels can be a lot of help before, during and after a crisis. Hale, Dulex and Hale (2006) have examined communication challenges decision makers experience during the response stage of crisis management. Response, according to them, is "the most critical of the three stages (prevention, responses, and recovery) identified in crisis research literature." Response is the point when crisis managers make decisions that may save lives and mitigate the effects of crisis. Actions at this stage also significantly influence public opinion about the crisis and an organization's handling of the event.

One of the theories that this study is based on is the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). According to Coombs (2006) the theory suggests that an organization's past history affects the reputational threat posed by a current crisis when that crisis results from intentional acts by the organization. Results from recent investigation by him show that a history of similar crisis intensified the reputational threat of a current crisis even when the crisis arose from the victimization of the organization or from an accident rather than from the organization's intentional acts. The threat to reputation was primarily direct, rather than indirect, through perceived responsibility of the crisis. There is little difference in the perceptions of organizations identified as having had no history of past similar crisis versus those for whom no information about past crisis was provided.

Another theory that is relevant to the study is the Social Relations Theory. This theory is based on the assumption that people can be grouped into broad collectives based on the basis of shared orientations and characteristics. It contends that people belonging to the same group will select identical information content and react to it in a fairly different manner. The theory also postulates that demographic variables such as age, race, income, education, occupation and place of residence can determine message saliency for the group. So in an institution of higher learning, components such as students, workers, management, contractors, suppliers, stakeholders and other publics will play crucial roles in determining their perception, opinion and attitudes toward the school. The institution or organization must, therefore, know the various socio-cultural group formations within its publics, understand their make-up and the aims and objectives for their existence in order to work towards establishing mutual relationship with each of them. The social relations theory is, therefore, an important premise on which this study is anchored.

This is more so, because the theory is in consonance with the Social Judgment theory of Muzaffer Sherif, which holds that the subconscious sorting out of ideas occurs at the point of perception of which the individual weighs every new idea by comparing it with his present point of view. The same message can thus strike two different people as radically different.

Sherif's studies (Griffin, 2000:180), therefore reveals that people's perceptions are invariably altered dramatically by group membership.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study employed the survey research method. Personal interviews and self-administered questionnaire were used as instruments of data collection. The polytechnic's Public Relations Officer and the chairman of the Students' Welfare Committee (SWC) were interviewed. One hundred and sixty copies of the questionnaire were administered on a sample taken from the student's population. The polytechnic is made up of the Schools of Business Studies, Applied Sciences, Engineering and Arts and Design. A sample of 40 students was taken from each school making a total of 160 students out of a population of 3,000.

For clarity and easy understanding of the findings, the data gathered were analyzed using the simple table construct and percentages. The reason being that the study is mainly an analysis of facts and decisions already made. All responses given were tallied and the number of frequencies for each choice converted into percentages. This was then interpreted and deductions and generalizations made.

## **PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA**

**Table 1: Distribution of Respondents by Sex**

Sex	No. of Respondents	% of Respondents
Male	96	60
Female	64	40
	160	100

Twenty-four (24) male students and sixteen (16) female students were randomly sampled from each of the four schools. The table above shows that 96 (60%) members of the sample are male, while 64 (40%) are female.

**Table 2: On whether the students get information regularly about activities in the school from management (Research Question 1)**

Response	No of Respondents	% of Respondents
Yes	44	27.5
No	116	72.5
Total	160	100

Table 2 shows that only 44 students (27.5%) said that they get information regularly about the activities of the school. Majority, 116 students (72.5%) said they are largely ignorant about school's activities. The responses here go a long way to answer Research Question 1. The fact that most of the students are regularly kept in the dark about school's activities clearly indicate a communication/information gap.



**Table 3: Whether they are aware of the existence of a Public Relation Department in the school (Research Question 2)**

Response	No of Respondents	% of Respondents
Yes	52	32.5
No	108	67.5
Total	160	100

From the table above, it can be seen that only 52 of the respondents, that is 32.5% said they are aware of the existence of a PR departmental in the school. Majority 108 (67.5%) of the respondents said that they are not aware that such a department exists. It can, therefore, be deduced that the PR department is not playing the role it is supposed to play. This answers Research Question 2.

**Table 4: Whether there has been conflict between the Polytechnic's management and students as a result of poor public relations and the inherent communication problem (Research Question 3)**

Response	No of Respondents	% of Respondents
Yes	128	80
No	32	20
Total	160	100

The table above shows that majority of the respondents 128 (80%) belief that there has been conflict between the Polytechnic's management and students because of poor public relations and lack of communication links. Only thirty-two (32) (20%) said they do not belief that lack of adequate communication is the reason. This answers Research Question 3.

**Table 5: How do Students obtain information about the Polytechnic's activities? (Research Question 4)**

Responses	No of Respondents	% of Respondents
Through the media	8	5
Through the students welfare committee	132	82.5
Through the PR office.	0	0
From other students in form of rumuors	20	12.5
Other sources	0	0
Total	160	100

The table above shows that only eight (5%) of the respondents get their information about the school activities from the media. Majority, 132 (82.5) said that they get information from the student's welfare committee. None of the respondents said they got their information

through the public relations office Twenty (12.5%) of the respondents said that they get their information in the form of rumours. None said they got theirs from other sources. The implication is that the PR department is not functioning as a communication link between the students and management. Findings here show that majority of the students get their information from the Student Welfare Committee. While rumour peddling takes care of the rest of information flow within the Polytechnic. This answers Research Question 4.

**Table 6: Does the school's authorities respond to student's demands without students protesting first? (Research Question 5)**

Response	No of Respondents	% of Respondents
Yes	16	10
No	144	90
Total	160	100

From the table above, it can be seen that only an insignificant sixteen (10%) said that the school authorities respond promptly to their demands without some form of protest or the other, while an overwhelming 144 (90%) said that it is only after students have protested that the authorities met their demands. This is an obvious indication that management is not proactive but reactive in crises management. This, thus, answers Research Question 5.

#### **RESPONSE FROM THE POLYTECHNIC'S PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER**

**1. Does management make use of the PR Unit?**

**Answer:** The use of the PR unit by management is very minimal. Its use is limited to the coverage of ceremonies and providing publicity in the media when necessary.

**2. What tools does the PR Unit employ in communicating Management's decisions to the Polytechnic's internal and external publics?**

**Answer:** A news bulletin was introduced to inform staff, students and the external publics about developments in the institution but after the first and second issues, the bulletin was suspended due to management's unwillingness to fund it.

**3. Does management call meetings to discuss the way forward with the Student's Welfare Committee?**

**Answer:** In the past, the former Rector used to call meetings to dialogue with the student's representatives to find solutions to problems facing the students. The PRO was privileged to cover some of the meetings, but with the change in leadership, I am not aware, if any, such meetings have been convened.

4. **What are the constraints of the Public Relations Unit?**

**Answer:** The unit, though under the office of the Rector/Chief Executive is not independent to enable it undertake assignments or perform its public relations duties optimally. Excessive interference by the Registrar in the affairs of the unit poses a major problem. The Registrar sees the PR unit as an extension of his office because the PRO is a registry staff. Until a separate cadre (director cadre) is created for the public relations department, this problem will continue. In some institutions, like Enugu State University of Technology (ESUT), the head of the PR department is a Director and is responsible to the vice chancellor.

5. **What strategies were used during the last students' demonstration?**

**Answer:** To safeguard the institution's image, I had to prevail on journalists who were bent on reporting the student's protest to kill the story. Secondly, I had interacted with the students and their leaders to ensure that the protest did not escalate into violence. By engaging them in conversation, we succeed in persuading them to dialogue with the management of the institution.

**RESPONSES FROM THE CHAIRMAN STUDENTS' WELFARE COMMITTEE (SWC)**

**On what prompted the last student's demonstration?**

**Answer:** The grievances include:

1. Inadequate buses for transportation
2. High grading system
3. Lack of business centers inadequate catering services and the absence of other providers  
of essential services on campus.
4. Non-release of SWC's bank account among others.

**On whether these grievances had been presented to management before the demonstration**

**Answer:** The grievances have been presented at various times to the Student's Affairs office but unfortunately there have not been responses from the management. May be these grievances are not forwarded to management. There has actually been a communication breakdown between the SWC and management.

**On What the demonstration achieved?**

**Answer:** At an emergency meeting, the Registrar acknowledged the fact that there had been a communication gap between the Students and the Student Affairs division/management. Management also promised to look at all the students' grievances except that of high grading system; the reason being that the standards are those set by the National Board for Technical Education and hence cannot be lowered for any reason.

On what students feel is the cause for misunderstanding between them and management

Answer: At the emergency peace meeting, there is a very wide gap in communication between the students and management. Assuring proper liaison between the Public Relations Unit and the Students Affairs division could solve this problem. There should also be regular meetings between students and management and not only when there is a crisis.

### DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings from this study revealed that the major cause of friction and crisis between students the management of the school is lack of proper communication channels for students to present their grievances. Another problem is that of management not being proactive in handling the students' problems. Management only responds when there is a crisis. The problems are very glaring and management should be able to hold regular consultations with students to explain to them the problem of financial constraints and solicit their understanding. In other words, management should be proactive rather than reactive.

It was also found that public relations is not recognized as a management function capable of operating as a separate department, headed by a director and capable of disseminating information adequately to the polytechnics' various publics as well as advising the management. The Public Relations unit is an extension of the registry and proper public relations activities are not embarked upon. Public relations activities are at their lowest ebb and most of the communication problems in the polytechnic can be attributed to this. Because public relations is not recognized as a management function, it cannot optimally serve as an essential communication tool in the polytechnic. In effect, there is no deliberate, planned and sustained effort, on the part of management to proactively establish and maintain effective communication to facilitate the management of conflicts between the institution and its various publics.

### CONCLUSION

Using the survey research method, the study was able to establish that there is need for effective communication strategies in Delta State Polytechnic Ogwashi-Uku and most of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Higher institutions of learning, like other human organizations, of necessity, need an effective and efficient public relations policy. The existence of such a policy will be of immense benefit to the organization and institution and go a long way in preventing a lot of crisis situations. Crisis, no doubt, are bound to occur but the adoption of efficient and effective public relations strategies will go a long way to curbing incessant students crisis and frictions between management and its publics. The findings of this study supports past findings of Nwosu (1994), Onah (2001), Nworgu (2005) and Nwachukwu (2006) on the same subject.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku typifies organizations that pay lip service to public relations. Here, neither is public relations accorded its rightful place as a management function nor is it proactive in combating disasters. Again, there is power or authority struggle within the institution's management. Whereas the head of the public relations unit should be responsible to and hence report to the chief executive, (the Rector), the Registrar insists that he is a Registry staff and so should be responsible to the Registrar. The same Registrar would, however, on other circumstances, admit that Administrative Officers posted to the various schools and departments are responsible to the line Heads of the places of their posting. Apparently, the Registrar sees himself as the supremo in matters of publicity with regards to the polytechnic, without realizing the specialized role of the Public Relations Officer as the institution's image-maker and communication expert. Based on the findings of this study, that inadequate communication and communication breakdown between the management, on the one hand, and the student population and the press, on the other, were responsible for the January 2007 crisis in the polytechnic and its aftermath, the following recommendations are proffered:

- a. The public relations unit should be an autonomous directorate independent of the registry, and the PRO should report directly to the Rector/Chief Executive as is the practice in most organizations – including high institutions of learning
- b. Management should provide enough funds for public relations activities. This should include the publication of a regular house journal and bulletin.
- c. The polytechnic's authorities should involve students more in the management of their affairs to give them more sense of belonging. In this regard, the management of Delta State Polytechnic, Ogwashi-Uku should establish an Open House Forum at least once in a year where the generality of students and management can meet to rub minds freely on issues of common interest without any student being afraid of victimization. In addition, management should hold regular meetings with the student's representatives to discuss matters relating to the institution's policies and student's welfare.
- d. Management should make efforts to gradually solve the numerous problems like lack of hostel accommodation, transportation and so on experienced by students.
- e. The public relations Unit should try to improve its relationship with the press to avoid the kind of false announcement of closure of the institution in the wake of the January 2007 crisis.

- f. The management should also improve its relationship with its host communities to avoid conflicts with its external publics.

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