

Community Relations: An Impetus for Educational Growth and Development in Nigeria

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Abstract

Community Relations is one indispensable factor for growth and development especially in a fast changing society like Nigeria- As fracas between institutions of learning and their host communities has become a reoccurring trend in Nigeria, it is imperative to adopt community relations in order to not just enjoy a mutual relationship but to boost academic growth and development. This paper examines, using literature study as a method, the importance of community relation in strengthening academic growth and development in Nigeria. The paper concludes that if properly harnessed, community relation would certainly enhance the performance of institutions in Nigeria

Keywords: Community Relations, educational Growth, Nigeria

Introduction

Every society irrespective of its size desires and works towards attaining some level of development. Interestingly, education plays a very important role in facilitating the much desired development. Education is key to every society's growth and an important tool for national development. For quality education to be achieved in a nation, the institutions and local community must coexist and maintain mutual relationship. Since institutions do not exist in isolation but hosted by a community they serve, there has to be a relationship that would help establish and sustain good understanding between both parties. Olanrele and Awodoyin(2011) notes that although, the school may be regarded as an entity of its own, but, it is also a part of the wider society in which it is located. Under an ideal situation such educational institution, in its daily activities tends to reflect the values of the host community. It is from this point of view that in educational management, the relationship between an institution and its community is vital.

Every academic institution is primarily established to pursue academic excellence. Thus, it strives through various means to achieve academic growth and development, a process Rogers (1979) describes as a widely participatory process of social change and material adjustment including greater quality freedom and other valued qualities for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment. The symbiotic relationship between the educational institutions and their host community and how this determines the quality of education is the crux of institutions community relations in educational management.

Nigerian education system started slowly but soundly developing during the colonial era. The missionaries introduced the western education system in the mid 19th century with the help and assistance of the communities. The missionaries enjoyed the support of the host communities in various ways (voluntary labour, donation of piece of land for school construction and willingness to allow their wards enrol) to sustain the momentum of establishing western educational schools. This trend has been sustained to this moment. It is a common scenario to find communities clamouring for siting of an institution in their domain. Sometimes it takes serious lobbying of government to be accorded the opportunity of laying host to an institution of learning.

However, it is noticeable in recent times in Nigeria that there is a reoccurring trend of clashes between institutions of learning and their host communities. At various times , certain circumstances have resulted to friction and very sour relationship between institutions and their host communities with devastating negative consequences on not only the quality of education but also the growth and development of education generally. For example in October 2012, *ScanNews* carried this headline "How UNIPORT Students Were Brutally Murdered By Aluu Vigilantes" . Four University of Port Harcourt (UNIPORT) undergraduates were brutally murdered in cold blood over alleged stealing at Aluu, a community that shares boundary with the university but allocated under Ikwerre Local Government Area of Rivers State (Iruoma, 2012). *Vanguard* newspaper of 27 February had this headline "Killing: LAUTECH seeks intensive surveillance of host community". It was reported that a 100 level Transport Management student of the institution, was killed by unidentified assailants. Similarly, *Punch* Newspaper of 13 April, 2012 had this headline "Oko Poly reconstitutes panel over students, indigenes clash". It was reported that there was a violent clash between students of the institution and youths of the host community that led to the closure of the polytechnic on March 26.

Most recently, *Trumpeta* newspaper, reported “FUTO, Host Communities War Deepen, Mass Destruction in Varsity Campus”. The report revealed that “irate” youths of the Host community of Federal University of Technology Owerri, went on rampage on 7 May, 2014 and destroyed properties of the university. There are several of such incidences. There is also situation where host communities protest over appointment of institution’s leadership

Considering the disturbing trend of clash of interest between institutions of learning and the host community in Nigeria this paper examines the importance of community relation from the public relations perspective in Nigeria. The paper adopts a literature study approach as a method.

Community Relations is an indispensable factor for growth and development especially in the present changing social, political and economic climate where everyone wants to grow, wants to succeed, wants to be heard and recognized, wants to be involved in what daily activities of his locality. Offonry (1985) points out that the common denominator for achieving this objective is embracing the business of creating and maintaining public understanding and support or sticking to the management function which attempts to create goodwill for an organization and its products; services or ideas with groups of people which can affect its present or future welfare. Today no matter how large, small or important an institution may be it can be undermined if its community relations are haphazard (Peak, 1991).

Conceptualization

Educational Institutions: Educational institutions are places where people of different background and ages gain general sense by way of learning in which knowledge skills and habits are transferred from one generation to another through teaching, training and research. Principles of educational institutions design is based on provision of opportunities for multiple forms of participation that nurtures communities of practice in which students jointly develop their learning potential to its fullest. The vision is such that learning is fostered as shared enterprise, participation, engagement, contribution, connection, experimentation and inquiry (Eckert, Goldman and Wenger, 1997)

Community Relations: According to Gambo and Wilson (2010) in a way both Public Relations and Community Relations attract similar meanings but in practice is a subset of the former. There are numerous definitions of Public Relations but the one that is regarded as descriptive and functional is the one defined by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA)

Public Relations is a management function of continuing and planned characters, through which the public and private organizations institutions seek to win and retain the understanding, sympathy and support of those with whom they are or may be concerned by evaluating public opinion about themselves in order to correlate, as far as possible, policies and procedures, to achieve by planned and widespread information, more productive cooperation and more efficient fulfillment of their common inters.

The concept of “public” in Public relations needs to be clarified. It means a heterogeneous all individual or organizations that have direct or indirect relationship with an organization (The internal and external publics) who can contribute to its success or failure. The above definitions and many others recognize the public as an indispensable component of an organization’s profile. It is an acknowledgement that no organization is an island. In a democratic setting, there is a higher demand on especially public institutions to be more transparent, more accountable and friendly to one another and to the general public to succeed (Gambo and Wilson, 2010).

Community Relation refers to the demonstrations in concrete terms of an organizations appreciation of the wider horizons or social responsibilities of business through active involvement by its management and staff in public programmes and activities related to the welfare of the community within which it operates (Offonry ,1985). Littimore etal (2004) describe community relations as a public relations function, is an institution’s planned active and continuing participation with and within a community to maintain and enhance its environment to the benefit of both the institution and the community

The average community expects an institution or organization, be it government owned or private: government agency, parastatal, industrial, commercial firm, institution, association or non-governmental organization operating in its locality to contribute meaningfully towards its growth and development. The common expectation are usually in terms of provision of regular employment for members of the community consider the local people in the award of contracts and exhibit a realistic sense of some social responsibilities. This is because the host community of any organization is the most immediate representative of the general public whose goodwill is essential for the success and survival of such organisation’s business. This fact is often neglected by most organization on the ground that the government to whom taxes and rates are paid should be responsible for every basic need of the community

Offonry (1985) points out that this attitude is no longer as tenable in an age when there is an increasing interest

by host communities in the way organizations in their localities operate, the caliber and disposition of their management and what they do with their resources. Questions of conforming to general standard of morality willingness to support issues of interest to the community are often asked. The organization must know what the community expects from it and the community must be aware of what the organization can be expected to provide.

Today organizations must co-operate as well as compete to succeed. Even educational institutions compete to succeed. It is not hidden that our private educational institutions “gulp” a great nether of students in spite the cost of paying for such schools, they often get good locations, maintain good rapport with the community and carryout some social responsibilities to enjoy support for smooth operation of such schools. A lot of innovations have been introduced into community relations. The new collaborative approach is one strategy where organizations become part of the community creating win-win solutions that result in the healthier bottom line and benefit for stakeholders and for society as a whole. Lattimore (2004) points out that the key to any effective community relations programme is positive, socially responsible action to help the community on the part of the organization. The lesson for organization is simple. Regional, national and international concerns may preoccupy one, but don’t forget the people in the community.

Common Concern in the Community

Most of the issues discussed here-under have been of great concern to members of the host communities of educational institutions. Different feelings have been expressed about them and their consensus is that they affect understanding and smooth working relationship between the two parties. Some of these concerns are

- None involvement and participation of host community members in the affairs of the institutions for example committees, employment, etc
- Lack of respect for the community’s cultural values by the institutions
- Non consideration for admission of their wards
- Inadequate of assistance and support from the institutions (financial support during launching, community service levy).
- Non compensation of community land used by the institution

These and many more have attracted hostility to schools managements from the host community.

What Community Relations Does

Effective community relations depend on recognizing the interdependence of institutions with their communities. The cycle begins with people wanting to live in good communities and bringing their talents and skills to the local labour market. Institutions hire these employees who help the organization make good and realize its objectives. The organization then makes commitment to make the community an even better place to live.

Good community relations aids in security what the organization needs from the community and in providing what the community expect.

- It helps to protect organizational investments
- Increase patronage of products and services
- Improve the general operating climate for the organization
- Positive community relations can affect workers productivity when organizations provide cheap and affordable health services and education programmes for members of the community

Favourable community attitudes may influence workers attitude toward the organizations.

Community Relations Process

The clarity of the mutual interest of organization and other communities, however does not imply that the community relations can be practiced without careful planning and execution. An effective community relations does not just happen. It is built into the structure and culture of an organization. Community relations is an organizational attitude or state of mind rather than any practice. The community relations process includes:

- Determining the objectives Institutions should have a written strategic plan for community relations that defines managements view of its obligation to the community so that efforts can be coordinated and concentrated.
- Knowing the community relations policies and objectives are not determined according to idealistic principles. They come about by assessing organizational needs, resources and expertise on one hand and community needs and expectations on the other. Questions like:

- How is the community structured?
- What are the community strength and weaknesses?
- What does the community know and feel about the organizations?

- Communicating with communities Institution must be open to a variety of communication tactics to reach the important public, for example, employee communication; since a greater number of employees live in the community these employees can share the institutions message with neighbours and friends at games, while

shopping, when picking up children at school, at religious gathering etc. Others include, institution publications, visit to community leaders etc.

Criteria in Community Relations Activities

- Criteria's exist that organizations must consider to establish community relations programmes:
- Creating something needed that did not exist before
- Eliminating something that is a community problem
- Developing a means of self determination by higher knowledge about an issue and to identify what can be done to improve and protect the community
- Broadening use of something that exists to include the "have nots"
- Sharing equipment, facilities and professional expertise
- Tutoring, counseling and training

Typical Community Activities

Include:

- Discharge of local civic responsibilities including payment of local rates, taxes, community levies etc.
- Sponsoring social projects to address major community problems
- Creating employee volunteer programmes,
- Encouraging education through the award of scholarship to deserving students, presenting of prizes for best performances, etc.- Organizing special enlightenment programmes for schools, community leaders and others to educate them on the benefit arising directly or indirectly from the operation of the institution.
- Encouragement of personal friendship between members of organization on one hand and members of the community on the other.
- Ensuring that the majority of the lower categories of staff comprising labourers, messengers, attendants are recruited from the locality

Educational Institutions and Community Relations

Having looked at the basics of community relations, it would be much easier to comprehend and appropriately find a place for educational institutions in community relations. All type of organizations practice community relations. Churches, Mosques, Hospitals, Banks, and Schools depend on community relations the way businesses depend on marketing as the primary means by which customers are attracted. Organizations including educational institution must strive for community acceptance. It is obvious that educational institutions are often sought for by communities but notwithstanding, institutions are expected to maintain community relations to enable it get community support and to effectively operate. One may wonder or ask what would an educational institution offer its community besides educating its local people?

Good Community relations by an educational institution aids in securing what the institution needs from the community and in providing what the community expects. Moreover, it helps to protect the institution by creating a conducive operating climate.

Some areas of community relations by educational institutions include:

- Providing employment for the local people
- Providing admission for the local people
- Providing resource person on educational activities of the community
- Courtesy calls on community leaders to explain the operation of the institution.
- Providing cheap and affordable educational services to the community for example the qualitative Nursery and primary School education provided through the staff School to the local community
- Provision of facilities for use during events in the community for example Auditorium for functions, transportation assistance, sports facilities and resource persons.
- Sensitizing the community on the importance of education to the growth and development of the locality.

These and many other ways institutions provide community relations activities

Olanrele and Awodoyin (2011) identified various possible areas of mutual relationship, noting that there is no way institutions can exist in isolation. Thus there is need to identify possible initiatives.

Table 1. Types of Community Relations Initiatives

Types of Link	School to Community	Community to School
Use of physical school facilities.	Classrooms and halls for adult education classes and community occasions. ii) Venue for short in-service training courses particularly at the teacher training and secondary school levels. iii) School farm or garden as a model for locally-based farmers for demonstration work, or model farms. iv) The use of sports grounds for civic occasions.	i.) Shared use of Church hall, water supply, Clinics, Hospitals, library etc. (ii) Providing houses for teachers. iii) Providing land for school buildings, sports field, farms or gardens.
Economic contribution	i.) Labour contribution on local project. ii).Provision of employment opportunities. iii) Purchase of local products.	i).Labour contribution ii) Financial contribution for new facilities. iii) Provision of materials and furniture.
General services and help	i) School as base for local groups, choirs, scouts, and guides, sports, teams, plays and concerts. ii) Help for old and sick peoples. iii) Help with harvesting participation in local national festivals. iv) Fund raising v) Schools as postal center and polling stations. vi) Use of school bus. vii) Loan of equipment, furniture viii) Premises and teachers in national campaigns such as census, elections and health education. ix) School as based for post	i) Maintenance of school facilities ii) Provision of school security iii) Lending of equipment iv) Housing of students. v) Serving as gardeners/caretakers. vi) Provision of resource persons.
Research, knowledge and cultural records	i.Recording and preservation of local traditions lore, historical events etc. ii) Providing the personnel for research into local history and problems.	i.Provision of information for school museum. ii) Contribution of artefacts to school museum. iii) Opportunities for study of local activities and customs.
Teaching	i.Education (literacy) for adults and out of school youths. ii) Extramural classes, seminars and course for professionals. iii) Correspondence courses.	i) Use of local people as instructors, religious leaders, story tellers, dancers, carpenters. ii) Parental help as teacher assistants, etc. iii) Practicing professional demonstration.
Management	i. Staff and students involvement in local affairs committees, church, mosque and agriculture. ii.Students involvement in youth organizations. iii) Training in management	i)Participation in school committees ii)Local coaches helping in soccer, basketball, swimming, athletic etc.

Source: *Olanrele and Awodoyin (2011)*

Academic Growth and Development

Every organization exist to experience growth and to develop in the course of its operation. In community relations, it is also expected that the local community is not left out in experiencing growth and development. As an organization develop, so should the host community enjoy some degree of growth and development. An academic institution ordinarily expects academic growth and development and the host community is expected to enjoy from it. As an academic institution enjoys transformation in its quality of academic performance, quality of staff performance, students performance, quality of facilities, quality of outputs (graduates) quality of management, curriculum enhancement, it is expected that this transformation should rub-off on the host community;

Academic growth and development is all about a participatory process of change and material adjustment including greater quality of academic activities and other valued qualities for the majority of the people. When there is improvement in quality in various academic activities as indicated above, these therefore is said to be

development. How then does community relations come to play? Community relations as we all know, is an interdependent relationship. While the academic institution helps in its own way the community plays its own role.

When an academic institution gives a good quality education, its product or graduates are of good quality ideally the host community enjoys admission advantage because of the location of the institution. Graduates are often ploughed back to the community which obviously bring about growth and development in literacy level of the community

Communities in return besides provision of land for location of institution, provision of students for the institution, sometimes provide needed academic facilities, like laboratory equipment, books, and furniture to assist institution because of good community relations. As we all know qualitative academic facilities available for academic activities is a form of academic development.

Conclusion

When an academic institution experiences growth and development, it is because its activities and operations are effectively managed. Effective management is only possible when the institution is accepted by the host community from where it draws its support and strength to act. Community relations is no doubt an impetus to academic growth and development in any academic institution provided it is effectively harnessed. It is recommended, among others that management or leadership of educational institutions should consider the intensification of psychological training, mutual respect among staff and students of institutions, introduction of periodical publications that showcases the activity of the institution and organize special recreational events like exhibition, cultural events that would involve the host communities as some of the most useful ways of enhancing interrelationship in the community.

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