An Evaluation of Public Relations’ Role in Crisis Management in Selected Tertiary Institutions in Delta State

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Abstract
Over the years, institutions of higher learning have come under intense pressure as cultism, internal wrangling, frequent students unrest and industrial disharmony now characterize the higher education system. In spite of concerted efforts by government and institutional heads to arrest the drift engendered by these undesirable factors, not much success has been recorded. As the problems continue to fester, many have reasoned that there is need for a more pragmatic public relations approach described as purveyors of knowledge, nursery of intellect and character rediscover their mission of inculcating proper value orientation for the survival of society as well as building individual and institutional capacities. It is against this background that this study was designed. Data were sourced from one hundred and fifty respondents drawn from three institutions: Delta State University Abraka, College of Education Warri and College of Education Agbor. Opinion expressed by the respondents reveals that institutional heads owe it a duty, in collaboration with their public relations personnel, to ensure the creation of a conducive atmosphere on campus devoid of rancour, bickering and incessant students’ unrest. The study identified the nature of crisis that has bedevilled the institutions and the strategies applied to manage the crisis and their level of effectiveness. The study concluded that strategies used in dealing with crises in these institutions have not been effective. Based on the findings of the study, the researcher made some useful recommendations that would help to checkmate and manage students and staff related crisis on campus.

Introduction
The importance of education to the development of human society cannot be overemphasized. Writing as far back as 1711, Joseph Addisson, notes “… what sculpture is to a block of marble, education is to the soul”. This is in consonance with the many years long statement of Epictetus (100 C.E.) that “… only the educated are free” (Awake! August 22, 2000).

Flowing from the above, the whole of human progress is now being hinged on the ever-growing influence of good education. Today, good education is seen as a basic need of man. Rather than viewing it as an unachievable luxury, many perceive it as a right of both children and adults. Studies have shown that quality education encourages individual participation, expands peoples’ knowledge of the world around them, and provides them with values that can transform their lives.

Education is devoted to the transmitting of a specific body of knowledge, values, and norms of behaviour. Hence, Kornblum (1994, p. 577) defines it as

… the process by which a society transmits knowledge, values, norms and ideologies and in so doing prepares young people for adult roles and adults for new roles; in other words, it transmits the society’s culture to the next generation."

He opines that education is a form of socialization that is carried out by institutions outside the family such as schools, colleges, preschools, and adult education centres. Each of these, as Kornblum rightly observed is an educational institution because it encompasses a set of statuses and roles designed to carry out specific educational functions.

All over the world, educational institutions have great impact on communities where they are sited, and the larger society in general. Most cities owe their existence, growth and development to the presence of a higher institution.

In the years past, institutions of higher learning in Nigeria were established by the Federal and State governments only. This was so because only both tiers of government have the exclusive rights under the country’s educational policy to own and run tertiary institutions.
Not long after, with the near collapse of the university system and the clamour for more universities, especially private ones, it dawned on government that tertiary education was too financially involving for it to bear alone. And so, it became imperative for government to review the policy to allow for private participation. The first courageous attempt aimed at liberalizing higher education was taken by General Abdulsalam Abubakar (rtd.), then head of state. He braves all the odds to give approval for the first private university in the country. Chief Gabriel Osawaru Igbinedion, founder and chancellor of Igbinedion University, Okada in Edo State became the lucky Nigerian to own a private university through that singular and benevolent act.

Currently, the number of universities has risen to over a hundred with more approvals of private and public universities being anticipated in the near future. Similarly, the number of colleges of education, polytechnics/monotechnics and other institutions is also on the increase. All of these have been playing a leading role in providing the educational needs of Nigerians, as well as contributing to human capital development in our society.

Statement of the problem
The developments in these institutions, over the years, especially the publicly-owned, have not been too encouraging. Most of the institutions have become hotbed of violence and are on the verge of being consumed by cultism, internal wrangling, industrial disharmony and frequent students’ unrest. These ugly unfoldings have impacted negatively on the higher education system and are becoming a major source of worry to government and other stakeholders. It is against this backdrop that this study was designed. This study therefore seeks to evaluate the public relations strategies used by institutions to prevent and manage crisis and to identify specific ways they can be applied to tackle the problems that have bedeviled the higher education system in Nigeria.

Research Objectives
The study was conducted to:
   i. Identify the nature of crisis in tertiary institutions in Delta State.
   ii. Find out the factors that have contributed to the crisis situations.
   iii. Evaluate the strategies used in crisis prevention and management in the institutions.
   iv. Determine the effectiveness of the strategies used in tackling the problems that have plagued higher institutions in the state.

Research Questions
   i. What is the nature of the crisis that has affected higher institutions in Delta State?
   ii. What factors have contributed to the crisis-situation in the institutions?
   iii. What are the strategies used in crisis prevention and management in the institutions?
   iv. How effective are the strategies in solving the problems that have plagued the institutions?

Scope of the Study
The study is concerned with investigating the role of public relations in management and prevention of crisis in selected tertiary institutions in Delta State. It seeks to specifically determine the nature of crisis that has affected the institutions and the public relations strategies used in solving the crisis and their effectiveness.

In doing this, three out of the nine tertiary institutions in Delta State were selected for the study:
   i. Delta State University, Abraka – Delta Central Senatorial District.
   iii. College of Education, Warri - Delta South Senatorial District.

The choice of these tertiary institutions was based on two main considerations. First, these are the oldest and prime tertiary institutions in the state and have witnessed several crises. Secondly, they are located each in the three senatorial districts, central, north, and south, of the state.

Significance of the Study
Crisis poses a great threat to the survival of modern societies. Its negative impact has also been felt in our vital institutions, including tertiary institutions in Delta State.
In view of the above, any research conducted in this area would be considered worthwhile. To an extent, institutional authorities have come to realize that public relations is a necessary tool for the management of crisis.

Therefore, the findings and recommendations of the study will provide a sustainable framework for institutional heads to handle crisis in their respective schools. It will also add to the existing literature within public relations domain.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the human needs theory. Its main assumption is that all humans have basic needs which they seek to fulfil, and that the denial and frustration of these needs by other groups or individuals could affect them immediately or later, thereby leading to conflict (Rosati et al; 1990). ‘Basic human needs’ in this sense comprise physical, psychological, social and spiritual needs. In essence, to provide access to one (e.g. food) and deny or hinder access to another (e.g. freedom of worship) will amount to denial and could make people to resort to violence in an effort to protect these needs.

Need theorists over time have identified some of these needs the deprivation of which cause conflict. Maslow in his Motivation and Personality identified physiological needs, safety needs, belongingness and love, esteem and self actualization. Burton lists response, stimulation, security, recognition, distributive justice, meaning, need to appear rational and develop rationality, need for sense of control and the need for role defense (Burton, 1979:72). He refers to some need as basic, such as food, shelter, sex and reproduction, etc. Edward Azar names some basic needs like security, distinctive identity, social recognition of identity and effective participation in the processes that shape such identities (Azar, 1994).

Burton (1979) identified a link between frustration which forces humans into acts of aggression and the need on the part of such individuals to satisfy their basic needs. According to him, individuals cannot be taught to accept practices that destroy their identity and other goals that are attached to their needs and because of this, they are forced to react against factors, groups and institutions that they see as being responsible for threatening such needs.

Human needs for survival, protection, affection, understanding, participation, creativity, and identity are shared by all people, are irrepressible, and according to Burton, have components (needs for recognition, identity, security, autonomy and bonding with others) that are not easy to give up. No matter how much a political or social system tries to frustrate or suppress these needs, it will either fail or cause for more damage on the long run. Like Gurr’s thesis on relative deprivation, Max-Neef (1991) cited in Ademola (2007:52) believes that the tension between deprivation and potential are main issues addressed by the human needs theory because when important needs are not sufficiently satisfied, economic and political problems will continue to grow. The absence of economic opportunities, hyper-inflation, and penury are manifestations of economic imbalance; while political imbalance leads to fear, xenophobia (intense fear or dislike of foreign people, their customs and culture), crime and violence, forced migration, voluntary or forced exile and political marginalization. All these constitute the root causes of bitter conflicts.

Even though needs scholars identify a wide range of human needs, some of which they consider to basic frustration of these needs hampers the actualization of the potentials of groups and individuals, subsequently leading to conflict. Secondly, there is near consensus among them that to resolve a conflict situation, or to even prevent it from occurring, the needs have to be met with appropriate satisfiers, those things that were denied them in the first instance (Ademola, 2007:53).

**Literature Review**

A former American leader, Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) and 16th President (1861-1865) was quoted to have said that

... public sentiments are everything; with public sentiment nothing can fail, without it, nothing can succeed. He who moulds sentiment goes deeper than he who executes statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decision possible or impossible to execute.
Lincoln also said that public relations is everything. One of the progenitors of modern public relations, Edward Bernays also emphasizes the human factor as the most significant variable in the practice of public relations. Bernays in Media Review (1997:29) said

... no institution including government can survive, much less flourish, if its policies, programmes and actions fail to meet or are perceived as failing to meet the expectations of the publics it seeks to serve.

A lot of public relations definitions exist but the most frequently quoted is the Mexican Statement signed by representatives of more than thirty national and regional public relations associations in Mexico on August 11, 1978, which says

... Public Relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organization’s leadership, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization’s and the public interest.


Another relevant definition of public relations is that which was contained in an official statement of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) issued on November 6, 1982. It reads in part: “... Public Relations help our complex, pluralistic society to reach decisions and function more effectively by contributing to mutual understanding among groups and institutions. It serves to bring private and public policies into harmony. Public relations serve a wide variety of institutions in society, such as business, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, foundations and hospitals, educational and religions institutions. To achieve their goals, these institutions must develop effective relationships with many different audience or publics such as employees, members, customers, local communities, shareholders and other institutions and with society at large. The management of institutions need to understand the attitudes and values of their publics in order to achieve institutional goals. The goals themselves are shaped by the external environment. The public relations practitioner acts as a counsellor to management and as a mediator, helping to translate private aims into reasonable, publicly acceptable policy and action” (Public Relations Society of America, 1991:4-5).

Johnstone and Zawawi (2004:6) define public relations as the “ethical and strategic management of communication and relationships in order to build and develop coalitions and policy, identify and manage issues and create and direct messages to achieve sound outcomes within a socially responsible framework”. This activity can be carried out by organizations, groups or individuals as they interact with their various publics or stakeholders to pursue objectives and goals. This view recognizes that communication should not be simply strategic because this implies the potential exploitation of the imbalance of power between the communicator and the recipient.

Ethical parameters allow the practitioner to ensure that public relations programmes and activities remain fair to those involved in the communication relationship. Coalitions and relationships are central. Without these foundation stones, it would be impossible for the practitioner’s efforts to have any effect. Thus the focus of much public relations activity is to create and recognize strong bonds at all levels.

**Role of Public Relations in Educational Institutions**

Operators and managers of higher institutions have since realized the importance of public relations in the day to day running of the institutions. They have come to realized that the institutions cannot survive without the support of its crucial publics (internal and external), and in order for them to function properly there is need to align their policies, goals and objectives with the interest of larger society.

According to Lattimore et al (2004:328) “Public schools as well as higher education institutions have found that public relations is increasingly important to them as they seek funds, deal with crises, or face many of the special situations revolving around education”. This is in tandem with the viewpoint of Biagi (2003:219)

*universities, colleges and schools often hire public relations people to promote these educational institutions and to handle press attention from the consequences of decisions that educators make.*
Hence, not surprisingly, most institutions now have a public relations unit situated in the office of the Chief Executive. Ken and Greenhall (1987:45), while defining public relations practice within higher education system aver that

... public relations practice is the process of organized two-way communication between an institution and its audiences; its objective is to build a level of mutual understanding and respect which allows the institution’s goal to be more readily met.

These authors who focused mainly on public relations practice in English Colleges, Polytechnics and Universities contend that whatever the colleges does is affected in some way by public relations. “Every letter that goes out (or remains unanswered), each public speech, the appearance of buildings, the attitudes of porters, drivers, and receptionist, the actions of principals, academics and administrators; they all add to or detract from the goodwill that exists between a college and or more of its audience”, they affirm.

Lending credence to the above, Jubril (1997:22) opines that,

public relations reduces industrial crises and students unrest, helps raise the quality of learning, and the acceptance of certificates, safeguards the tenure of chief academic officers, enhances the employment of graduates, raises the profile of graduates/alumni and attracts funding for the institutions, thus ensuring sustenance.

Ideally, institutional public relations should achieve the following:

- The implementation of the institution’s policy, goals and objectives.
- Assist the news media in coverage of the institution.
- Reporting to the employees and students on the institution’s activities.
- Increasing the internal cohesion of the institution.
- Increasing the institution’s sensitivity to its publics.
- Mobilization of support for the institution itself.

From the foregoing, it has become apparent that public relations in institutions strive to achieve what Jefkins (1988:9) calls the “transfer process”. This entails transforming public perception from negative dimension to the positive. Specifically, public relations is considered as capable of converting public ignorance to knowledge and awareness; apathy to interest and support, prejudice to sympathy and lastly, hostility to understanding and acceptance.

These principles, according to Fayoyin (1992), underlie the notional and philosophical basis of public relations which is primarily concerned with achieving understanding through knowledge.

**Public Relations and Crisis Management in Educational Institutions**

A crisis is an extreme situation of conflict, which has reached a turning point, where critical decisions have to be taken or else the conflict escalates to a point of extreme violence. Sometimes, a crisis is a degenerated state of conflict, where threats to human security, intense violence characterized by fighting, death, injury, large-scale displacement of populations, destruction of property, etc. occur. Once a crisis occurs, it is the responsibility of the government of a state or any other authority to de-escalate the situation and bring a cessation to violence. This may be done through various means, including the use of the coercive state apparatus, where necessary (Best, 2007:110).

The philosophy of public relations places much emphasis on the need for two-way communication in the management of crises in organizations. Experts have agreed that many forms of misunderstanding and difficulties that lead to conflict in organizations spring from poor or lack of communication, and managements and authorities are constantly encouraged to give information more readily and more often to employees and its public (Best, 2007; Madike, 2005).

Meaningful development can only be achieved through apposite communication. Public relations practitioners have the responsibility of facilitating communication and information flow between authorities of tertiary institutions and the relevant publics. Effective public relations is not only achieved by transforming messages and verifying their
reception, perception or induced action, it has very much to do with producing significant impact on the day-to-day behaviour of both organizations and their communications.

Much of the responsibilities to create a peaceful atmosphere for learning, teaching and research, and to sustain good image for higher institutions across the country rest with management. As Madike (2005) puts it,

...Good image cannot be achieved unless an organization has fulfilled the basic conditions of earning a good image, which includes effective management of resources, industrial harmony and societal acceptance.

For an organization (in this case tertiary institution) to build good image the chief executive must have strategic vision, ensure that the basic responsibility of management is performed dutifully and be certain that the organization is dynamic and responsible to the plight of the staff and students.

Methodology

The survey research method was used for the study. The instrument for data collection was the questionnaire. The population comprises top management staff, public relations officers, executives of students and staff unions, senior academic and non-academic staff of Delta State University, Abraka; College of Education Agbor and College of Education Warri. The researcher used the purposive sampling technique to select 150 respondents from these categories, that is, 50 subjects from each institution. The instrument was evaluated and validated by four experts in Faculty of Social Sciences, Delta State University, Abraka. Therefore, it was considered reliable, valid, adequate and appropriate for the study.

Results

Analysis of the data collected was based on the 150 copies of questionnaire returned. This represented 100 per cent rate of return. The high rate of response was due to the face-to-face administration of the instrument on the respondents by the researcher and his assistants over a period of three weeks.

Characteristics of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of the respondents used for the study were as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-60</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Education</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tertiary Education</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field work 2009*

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the respondents as they relate to their sex, age and education. Distribution of sex showed that 62 percent were male, while 38 per cent were female. The distribution of age grouping showed that 30 per cent were between 20 and 30 years, 34 percent were between 31 and 40 years; while 36 percent were between 41 and 60 years. Respondents’ levels of education indicated that 20 percent had secondary education and are undergraduates; while 80 percent had tertiary education qualifications.

Nature of Crisis that has Affected the Institutions

Respondents were asked to indicate the nature of the crises that have affected the institutions. Their responses were collated and tabulated as shown in Table 2.
**Table 2**

Nature of crisis that has affected the institutions (n=150)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of Crisis</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students induced crisis</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff induced crisis</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community induced crisis</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field work 2009*

Table 2 shows the nature of crisis that has plagued the institutions since inception: students induced crisis 62 percent; staff induced crisis 38 per cent; community induce crisis 0 per cent.

**Factors that Contributed to the Crisis Situation**

Responses on the factors that contributed to the crisis in the respective institutions were as presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

Factors that contributed to the crisis situation (n=150)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factors that contributed to the crisis situation</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students related crisis increase in tuition fees &amp; other sundry charges</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of water, electricity and cultism</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor hostel conditions</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff related crisis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agitation for increase welfare package</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protest against appointment of unpopular VC, Provost</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field work 2009*

Table 3 indicates that increase in tuition fees and other sundry charges (30 per cent); Lack of water, electricity and cultism (18 percent); poor hostel conditions (14 percent) are the factors that have contributed to students related crisis; while agitation for increase welfare package, appointment of an unpopular vice chancellor, provost are responsible for staff related crisis in the institutions.

**Strategies used in crisis prevention and management in the institutions.**

Respondents’ opinion on the strategies used in crisis prevention and management in the institutions were as presented in Table 4.

**Table 4**

Strategies used in Crisis prevention and Management (n=150)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for Crisis Prevention and Management</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coercion</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arbitration</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjudication</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conciliation</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Field work 2009*

Table 4 shows the strategies used in the institutions in crisis prevention and management: negotiation (44 percent), coercion (40 percent), collaboration (0 percent), mediation (16 percent), arbitration (0 percent), adjudication (0 percent) and conciliation (0 percent).

**Effectiveness of the Strategies in Crisis Prevention and Management**
Responses on the effectiveness of the strategies used in the institutions in crisis prevention and management were as presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Effectiveness of PR Strategies in Crisis Management (n=150)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effectiveness of PR Strategies</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very effective</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not effective</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Field work 2009

Table 5 reveals the level of effectiveness of the public relations strategies used in preventing and managing crisis in the institutions: very effective (22 percent), effective (32 percent) and not effective (46 percent).

Discussion
A number of findings in this study agree with the ideas expressed by scholars and researchers in other studies. Table 2 was used to answer research question one, which sought to know the nature of crisis that has affected the identified institutions in Delta State. The results showed that the crisis takes the form of students’ unrest (62 percent) and staff protest against poor welfare package and the appointment of an unpopular vice chancellor/provost (38 percent).

Table 3 answered research question two which seeks to identify the factors responsible for students and staff related crisis in the institutions. The results identified increase in tuition fees and other sundry charges (30 percent), lack of water, electricity, and cultism (18 percent), poor hostel conditions (14 percent) as some of the factors that have fuelled students crisis, while agitation for better pay, payment of claims and allowances, appointment of an institutional head (vice chancellor, provost) induce staff related crisis in the institutions.

It is worthy to note that there is hardly any public owned higher institution of learning that has not experience one form of students’ unrest or the other where violence reigned supreme. Protests against arbitrary increase in school fees and other sundry charges, poor welfare conditions such as lack of water, electricity, worsening hostel conditions and cultism are common knowledge. Soeze (2000:22) alluded to this fact when he said

...higher institutions remain the target of youthful discontent, sometimes in terms of legitimate complaints about the deficiencies of the institution and sometimes as a convenient tactic for assault upon the general society.

Crisis brought about by workers agitation for better pay, settlement of outstanding claims and allowances, and internal wrangling arising from the appointment of an institutional head is common place. Because of dwindling resources accruing to schools from government, most public higher institutions are finding it increasingly difficult to meet personal emolument costs, as well as pay other allowances due to staff. This situation has pitted the unions against management, leading to frequent declaration of industrial disputes which often paralyze academic activities.

Srivastava (2000:215) has noted that industrial disharmony is inevitable because the objectives of labour and management are not amenable to easy reconciliation in view of sharply divided and vociferous pressed claims. He however maintained that the means adopted to achieve the objectives, which vary from simple negotiation to economic warfare adversely, affect the institution’s interest in maintaining an uninterrupted and high level productivity.

Internal wrangling arising from the appointment of an unpopular head creates discord and acrimony among most institutions’ staff. It polarizes them along ethnic lines. During the selection process of a new vice chancellor, rector or provost, factions are created and splinter groups emerge, all trying to project their candidates and outwit one another. Most times when the political in-fighting becomes too tensed, government is forced to look elsewhere to pick a new helmsman. And when this happens, the crisis situation is further aggravated and the acrimony rages on. In fact most schools that are mired in this confusion are yet to recover from it.
Table 4 was used to answer research question three which ascertained the strategies used in crisis prevention and management. Findings from the study showed that negotiation (44 percent), coercion (40 percent) and mediation (16 percent) are the strategies used by the institutions to prevent and manage crisis. This reinforced the assertions of scholars that negotiation, mediation, and sometimes coercion can be used by authorities to maintain law and order, and restore confidence in crisis situations (Fisher et al, 2000; Miall et al, 1999; Miller, 2003; Best, 2007).

Table 5 answered research question 4 which investigated the level of effectiveness of the strategies used in solving the problems that have plagued the institutions. Findings from the study showed that the strategies have not been very effective. The response rate of 46 per cent as against 22 percent for very effective and 32 percent for effective is an indication that the management of the institutions have not made adequate use of negotiation, mediation and other strategies identified in this study. Consistent and adequate use of these strategies is very fundamental to the institutions’ ability to deal with crisis. Poor handling of crisis, according to Salu (1994, p. 206) can have long term negative effect that might cripple an organization and ruin its reputation.

Summary of Findings
The following are the major findings that emerge from the study:

- The nature of the crises that have affected higher institutions in Delta State include students and staff related crisis.
- The students’ related crisis is caused by increase in tuition fees and other sundry charges, lack of water, electricity, poor hostel conditions and cultism, while the staff induced crisis is fuelled by agitation for better welfare package, protest against appointment of unpopular vice chancellor, provost.
- The strategies used by the institutions to prevent and manage crisis include negotiation, mediation and coercion.
- The strategies have not been very effective in solving the problems that have plagued the institutions.

Conclusion
This study examined the role of effective public relations in crisis management in selected tertiary institutions in Delta State. It identified the nature of the crisis that has affected the institutions, the factors that contributed to the crisis situations, and the strategies applied in handling the crisis and their effectiveness. The conclusion reached in this study is that the strategies used in dealing with the crisis in these institutions have not been too effective.

The ultimate test for management of institutions is dealing with crisis since the phenomenon has become a regular feature in the higher education system. In these days when tertiary institutions are being choked by recurring crisis, institutional heads and their public relations personnel are under obligation to apply appropriate strategies to achieve three goals which crisis management experts have generally counseled their clients to do: terminate the crisis, limit the damage, and restore credibility.

Recommendations
Based on the findings of the study and the conclusion drawn, the following recommendations are made:

- Curbing students’ unrest is a vital component of the overall strategy to achieve stable academic calendar in institutions of higher learning and achieve peace on campus. In view of the many adverse effects that trail students’ protest, it is necessary for institutional authorities and governments to pay adequate and prompt attention to issues concerning students which mostly border on welfare. The authorities should endeavour to fulfill promises made to students, and if for any reason they are unable to live up to expectation, concerted efforts should be made to communicate with the students. It is by so doing that they can win their trust and confidence. Maintaining regular communication with students and dialoguing with their leaders on contentious issues to find a common ground can help to reduce tension on campus. As Black (1989) rightly pointed out, “…the purpose of PR practice is to establish two-way communication, seeking common ground on areas of mutual interest, and to establish understanding based on truth, knowledge and full information.” Besides, management staff should always make themselves available to students’ union leaders when the need arises and provide explanations for policies that have direct impact on students’ welfare. Such proper education and information can be issued through house organs of institutions such as information bulletins, news magazines. This will help to reduce or eliminate misunderstanding arising from communication gap.
• There is no denying the fact that internal wrangling or in-fighting has shaken many institutions to their foundations. Reconciling splinter groups in the academic community is a major challenge many newly appointed heads have to contend with. To overcome this problem would require building bridges of peace across factional groups. This is a task for the public relations unit and the new helmsman, using appropriate public relations strategies. The bridges should be able to connect everybody and all shades of opinion. In the process of healing the wounds, it is expedient for new heads to keep an open mind without taking sides. There is also the need to evolve a broad based policy that can accommodate people from different groups within the academic community. It is hoped that by the time the new head extends an open invitation and an olive branch to all, a lot of people in the opposing camp will have no option than to conform.

• Checking cultism in higher institutions requires a broad approach. Because of the serious danger it poses to higher education system, there is a compelling need for institutions to embark on intensive enlightenment campaign against the scourge. Part of the campaign strategy will involve organizing seminars and workshops, erecting billboards in campuses and printing leaflets with inscriptions condemning cultism in its entirety. Since most of the victims are fresh students, it becomes imperative to target the message at them. Penalties for belonging to any of the cult groups should be clearly spelt out in institutions’ handbooks distributed to fresh students and their attention drawn to the relevant sections during orientation and matriculation ceremonies. They should be made to understand that there is no gain belonging to any organization that can ruin a student’s life. Other measures to check cultism would include filtering the students during admission to ensure that students expelled from other schools are not admitted.

• The development and growth of any organization is hinged on the continued existence of a peaceful atmosphere. Without peace no meaningful progress can take place. Frequent industrial actions by workers create an unhealthy work environment which often leads to decrease in productivity. Most industrial crises in tertiary institutions are engendered by lack of funds to pay salaries promptly and settle other allowances due to staff, some institutions, in a bid to escape the wrath of workers have resorted to borrowing from banks to meet their financial commitments. And this has continued with no end in sight, but the unions appear not to appreciate the constraints of management. The task of public relations in this circumstance would be to harmonize management and staff interests, educate staff on the constraints, ensure that promises made are fulfilled within available resources and encourage regular communication between management and staff both in peace and crisis times.

References


