A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF IMPACT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS ON POLYTECHNICS IN GHANA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to understand public relations impact on polytechnics in Ghana. The aim of the study was to investigate public relations impact in promoting polytechnics in Ghana. The study was predominantly qualitative and in-depth face to face personal interviews using interview guide was the main tool used in gathering data from public relations personnel who have a deep knowledge in public relations practices. The study revealed that public relations units of polytechnics studied have not done much to manage the misconceptions about polytechnic education. The findings again showed that the units have not positioned the polytechnics in the minds of the publics to change their attitudes towards the products of the polytechnics. The study

further indicates that public relations units in the polytechnics studied lacked finance and needed recognition to run the unit effectively.

Keywords: Public relations impact, Polytechnics, Ghana.

1. Introduction

In Ghana, the role of polytechnics cannot be over emphasized. Polytechnics have been recognized by many Ghanaians as partners in educational development and have helped to reduce the pressure on the State Institutions such as University of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, University of Cape Coast, University of Education, Winneba, University for Development Studies, Tamale and the University of Mines and Technology, Tarkwa because of inadequacy of the institutional facilities in the State Institutions. Anecdotal evidence indicates that sections of the Ghanaian publics believe that students of polytechnics do not make the requirement grades to gain admission to the state universities. However, Moore and Kalupa (2007) believe that public relations play a role in monitoring and managing opinion of publics. Philips (2001) also asserted that the ability to monitor, measure, evaluate and plan content is critical for most public relations practices. A study on Approaches to and instruments of public relations in higher education in the Czech Republic, conducted by Heskov and Piroẑek (2003) found that the success of the new detached campus is accredited to skilful public relations. Owing to the significance public relations impact in promoting institutions and the fact that existing literature is silent on public relations activities in polytechnics, the aim of this study was to highlight on the impact of public relations in promoting polytechnics in Ghana. The objectives of the study were (I) To identify if public relations units of polytechnics have managed the misconception about polytechnic education and (II) To identify if public relations units have been able to change the attitudes of the public towards the polytechnics.

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2. Literature Review

This part of the paper looks at the definition of public relations, factors accounting for the growth of public relations and impact of public relations in promoting polytechnics in Ghana.

2.1. Definition of Public Relations

Marketing gurus have given numerous definitions to the term public relations but a more precise and comprehensive description of public relations according to Lancaster and Jobber (2006) is provided by Public Relations Society of America as follows:

i. Anticipating, analyzing and interpreting public opinion, attitudes and issues which might impact, for good or ill, on the operations and plans of the organization.

ii. Counseling management at all levels with regard to policy decisions, courses of action and communication.

iii. Researching, conducting and evaluating, on a continuing basis, programs of action and communication to achieve the informed public understanding necessary to the success of an organization's aims.

iv. Planning and implementing the organization's efforts to influence or change public policy.

v. Managing the resources needed to perform the functions of public relations.

Therefore, the relevance of public relations as the main ingredient in organization's organogram and its communication role both outwards and inwards with the purpose of achieving mutual beneficial relationship and understanding for growth and survival of any organization cannot be underestimated.

2.2. Factors Contributing to the Relevance of Public Relations

The growth of public relations has become very important in recent years in the following areas as asserted by (Moore & Kalupa, 2007).

- *The communications gap*

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Moore and Kalupa (2007) believe that the need for communication between organizations and their publics is attested to by the fact that public relations occupy a dominant role in the economy today. Therefore, for an organization to communicate to its target audiences require a middleman who will perform this function effectively and efficiently to have impact on customers who are the backbone of the organization (Moore & Kalupa, 2007). This makes public relations a pillar in the organization and utilizes certain instruments available to it, including the mass media and publicity; advertising, public speaking as well as persuasion to close the communication gap between the organization and the public.

- *Population growth*

A significant factor contributing to the development of public relations has been the increase in population and the resulting expansion of all types of business, social and political organizations (Moore & Kalupa, 2007). As the number of corporate employees, customers and stockholders increased, good communication from management to these publics was no longer possible. People were often unaware of what management was doing that affected their interests. As a result, serious misunderstandings occurred and goodwill was sacrificed. Therefore, to explain corporate policies, actions and bring about better understanding, organized public relations communication is essential (Moore & Kalupa, 2007).

- *Recognition of social responsibility*

Public relations has grown in importance as corporations recognized that they have a social responsibility to serve the public (Moore & Kalupa, 2007). Public services of corporations which include financial contributions to community, social welfare, health and youth organizations; participation by employees in local government and education; and sponsorship of cultural education have become critical and call for public relations attention (Moore & Kalupa, 2007).

- *Big government*

Government is the largest purchaser of goods and services in every economy. Hence, increasing government control of business, rising taxes, legislation adversely affecting business, legislative

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investigations of business and criticisms of business by politicians have all contributed to relations with local, state and national governments (Moore & Kalupa, 2007). Thus, public relations is now seen as pivotal in government to disseminate timely and accurate information for decision making and also communicate effectively to external publics or parties involved in government business.

- *Consumerism*

In 21st century marketing, propaganda which does not call for an ethical content but distorts facts and falsifies information (Lancaster & Jobber, 2006) has negative impact on goodwill and support of consumers. A cry for consumer rights has emerged in every part of business relations, product safety, truth in advertising, labeling and full warranties and this is being supported by the governments all over the world. This pressure represents, to business, both a challenge and an opportunity and calls for ethical marketing practices. This makes public relations indispensable in organizations (Moore & Kalupa, 2007).

- *New standards of ethics*

Higher moral standards and ethical conduct in business have contributed to the development of public relations. In today's business, management must speak truthfully, act fairly and deal honorably with the public in order to enjoy good public relations. Hence, new challenges and new responsibilities will accordingly fall on public relations. (Moore & Kalupa, 2007).

2.3.   Impact of Public Relations Activities in Promoting Polytechnics

Seitel (2007) believes that public relations is very essential in handling the relationship between an organisation and its publics to achieve its objectives. The impact of public relations activities in an organization may be looked at from different perspectives. However, a study conducted in a university by Yang (2007) revealed that if educational public relations professionals are authorized to participate in decision-making, public relations will have influence on public relations practices. The author further argues that it is only when an educational public relations professional has authority and takes part in decision-making that will enable him to perform effectively and

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efficiently. This view is also supported by Vercic and Grunig (2000) who point out that when public relations practitioners are involved in the strategic decision-making, it cushions public relations to deliver effectively. This places public relations in polytechnics as the eyes of both internal and external publics and improves the avenue for academic and social development (Kotler & Mindak, 2000). This will have a direct impact of public relations activities on the polytechnics and its image and activities. In the words of Clow and Baack (2007) and Wells *et al., (*2005) corporate image building, positioning or repositioning of institution, changing stakeholders' attitudes, opinions, or behaviors as well as building trust about polytechnics, their products and programmes are all impacts of public relations activities in polytechnics. Therefore, perceptions by the publics have an impact on the institutions image and operations. Duncan (2002) believes that perception is the result of communication; it provides a window on the success of the message strategy. Tellis (2004) further observed that the ultimate challenge for marketing communications is to convince consumers to change their perception of a brand. Thus, public relations as a communications tool is to promote products, people, places, and ideas, activities and countries (Kotler & Armstrong 2005). As a result, to manage misconception and change attitude, public relations play a key role (Jobber, 2001; Wells *et al.,* 2005). Kotler *et al.,* (2002) assert that public relations agencies find ways to create favorable news about the company, products and people. Belch and Belch (2004) also note that the knowledge of how customers acquire and use information from external sources is important to marketers in formulating communication strategies. According to Clow and Baack (2007) and Well *et al.,* (2005) one of the purposes of public relations practices is to make changes in the publics knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to an organization and its activities Hence, to realize the impact of public relations activities, practitioners must track the impact of a campaign in terms of output, how many news releases led to stories and outcome like attitude or behaviour change (Wells *et al*., 2005). McDonough and Egolf (2003) concede that public relations has the purpose to promote awareness of the client's product or services, stimulate sales, facilitate communication and build relationships between customers and companies and their brands.

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Merenda (2004) additionally state that credibility is a key in establishing trust in public relations practices. Therefore, establishing trusting relationship is an important objective in public relations. According to Huang (2001) trust is a crucial factor which influences relationships between publics and organizations. Kent and Taylor (2002) as it is known in public relations, once public trust is lost, it becomes very difficult and sometimes impossible to regain it. According to Palmer (2000) public relations offer several positive impacts that are not found with other promotional tools. This view is in line with a study conducted by Diamond (2005) and Weiner (2005) who argue and indicated growing importance of public relations in the marketing mix. Thus, public relations often considered as highly credible form of promotion, has an impact on organizational image and determines its survival, growth and profitability due to the common reason that information coming from public relations professional is always considered as coming from a credible source. This means that good public relations practices increase its impact positively on public perception of the polytechnics and its products and also respond quickly to negative information about the polytechnics when a problem arises in order not to jeopardize the polytechnics image. Therefore, for public relations practices to impact positively means that public relations of the polytechnics activities have resulted in positive corporate image building, effective positioning or repositioning of the polytechnics, changing stakeholders' attitudes and opinions about the polytechnics and building trust amongst the polytechnics' publics. Consequently, without proactive public relations unit to carry out effective programmes to manage misconceptions about polytechnics, its impacts on the polytechnics' operations will not be noticed.

In promoting polytechnics through public relations activities in Ghana, may be limited by the challenges faced by public relations professionals. According to Hall and Savery (1986) there are several challenges in the work environments which are characterized by keen rivalry, lack of time, uncontrollable factors, lack of space, continuous technological development and incompatible demands from organizational stakeholders. Lack of recognition of the work of public relations professionals in the polytechnic may also limit the ability of public relations officer to perform. Nelson (2003) believes that employees who are able to experience and receive recognition for their

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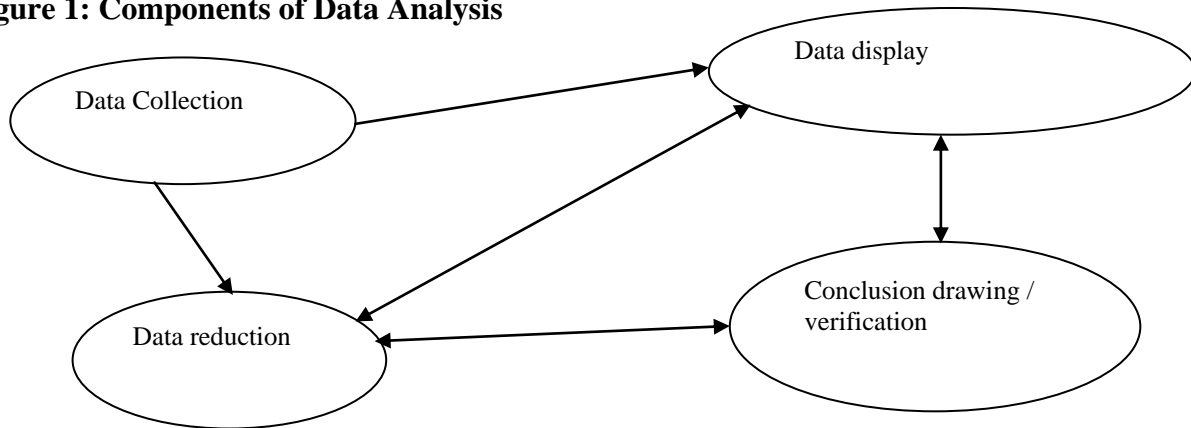
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hard work have a better perception about the organization. To run a unit or department effectively depends largely on money and Akintoye (2000) also emphasizes that money remains the most significant motivational strategy for any employee to perform. Sinclair, *et al.*, (2005) also explained that money has the power to attract, retain and motivate individuals towards higher performance. Therefore, without recognizing public relations officers coupled with other challenges such as money and human capital to perform may limit the ability of the public relations to change attitudes, build trust and position the polytechnics to build good corporate image.

3. Methodology

Data for the study was collected through personal interviews with the aid of an interview guide. Public relations officers were purposively selected (Miles & Huberman, 1994) from two polytechnics and quizzed on the impact of public relations in the institutions. Interview guide was employed because of the qualitative nature of the study and all interviews were recorded with respondents' permission and transcribed to reduce biasness (Patton, 2002).

To analyze the data gathered for the study, Eisenhardt (1989) as well as Miles and Huberman (1994) proposed framework for data analysis which involves Data Reduction, Data Display, Conclusion Drawing and Verification was used. The process of data analysis is illustrated below. The concept see data analysis as a flow process in which its components consist of data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verification interact with each other.

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Figure 1: Components of Data Analysis

Source: Miles & Huberman (1994)

- **Data Reduction**

Under this process, the researcher selected, focused, simplified, abstracted and transformed the written-up field notes and transcribed (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Accordingly, Miles and Huberman (1994) argued that data reduction occurs even before the data collection begins, when the researcher decides which data must be collected based on a conceptual framework and a prior proposition. The researcher used the data reduction approach during and after the fieldwork. Hence, summaries and building up recurring themes were used (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton 2002) and the essence is to reduce data overload so that sense and meaning can be drawn from the field notes.

- **Data Display**

According to Miles and Huberman (1994) data display is a visual format that presents information systematically. The data display by the researcher followed a fixed sequence where building of format, entering data, drawing conclusions, writing analytic text occurred. The data entry also took the form of short blocks of texts, quotes, phrases and rating (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

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- **Conclusion Drawing and Verification**

The final component of Miles and Huberman (1994) framework is conclusion drawing and verification. Conclusions was drawn by the researcher observing patterns, looking at contrasts, clarifying relationship and building coherent understanding. Eisenhardt (1989) also postulated that in the conclusion phase of a theory building research, the key is to compare emergent concepts, theory, or hypothesis with the extant literature. From the discussions above, one can argue that in data analysis process of qualitative research which is an approach that study phenomena in their natural settings without a predetermined hypothesis (Ary *et al.,* 2002) is an art and not a science, a practice enhanced through learning by doing (Robson, 2000).

4. Results of the Study

The results were described using the major factors identified in the interviews conducted with the participants.

All the participants from the polytechnics spoke on the impacts of public relations activities in polytechnics. Each saw their activities as very important and help maintain and enhance polytechnics performance.

Public relations officers were interviewed whether they see the public relations unit as an important element within the polytechnic. This was the explanation that the public relations officer from Polytechnic 'A' gave:

> *"The unit is key and has the ability to re-orient the minds of the public towards polytechnic education as well as educating the people on the philosophy of the polytechnic and also create avenue for the public to support the activities of the institution."*

In Polytechnic 'B', respondents expressly explained:

> *"The polytechnic public relations unit is important because the unit uses public relations strategies and techniques to construct and distribute messages to their key*

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> *constituents about the benefits they provide the nation and its citizens. Therefore, the unit is pivotal in every aspect of the polytechnic and key in disseminating information to the publics of the polytechnic".*

The respondents from the polytechnics were further quizzed on whether the polytechnics deliver on their promises of delivering quality services and if this has resulted in a positive development in the students and the public towards trusting the polytechnic. As the public relations officer from Polytechnic 'A' puts it:

> *"We believe that trust is critical and helps in delivering undiluted services to students in every polytechnic. Our first class lecture halls, proactive course contents and well qualified academic and non academic staff are helping to steer the affairs of students and our students are making positive impact in the job market and this enhances trust. Therefore if trust is managed correctly between the polytechnic and the   publics as a trustable and credible partner, the polytechnic reputation will be secured also in the future".*

At Polytechnic 'B', the interviewee stated and I quote:

> *"Quality service and trust are bed fellows. Without delivering quality service to students and the general public, the polytechnic will never be trusted as a true partner of social and economic development. Further, the polytechnic has a mandate to promote quality service delivery in all sectors of the institution so we strive to deliver towards quality in areas such as student admissions, human resources, lecturers conduct, examinations and library facilities etc".*

All the interviewees were asked whether the Polytechnics have chalked some significant success over the years and have been able to manage the misconceptions of the general public towards the polytechnic and its products. All Interviewees echoed*:*

> *"We have put measures in place to help educate the public about the strategic role of polytechnics and contribution of its students to the nation's development but have not totally eliminated the misconceptions that the polytechnics faced in Ghana*

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> *today. However, there is more to be done to change the attitudes of the general*
> *public towards polytechnics students to help boost students' enrolment".*

All the interviewees were interviewed on whether the polytechnics were an avenue for money making, unqualified lecturers and unqualified students. This question raised a very interesting response from the public relations officers at Polytechnic 'A' and Polytechnic 'B' and mentioned that such issues were all misconceptions and that the polytechnics are being monitored by the National Accreditation Board. Interviewees vehemently stated:

> *"The polytechnics are being monitored by the National Accreditation Board and*
> *cannot afford to break the laid down criteria to give the polytechnics a negative*
> *publicity and that the polytechnics will not compromise on any action that will*
> *tarnish their image and can never be used as an avenue for money making, avenue*
> *for employing unqualified academic staff and as an avenue for admitting*
> *unqualified students. The respondents echoed that National Accreditation Board set*
> *the guidelines for employing qualified lecturers to teach as well as occupying*
> *positions and also stipulate the admission criteria for students to be admitted".*

Participants were again questioned on whether the public relations units of the polytechnics have succeeded in positioning the polytechnics in the minds of the publics.

Respondent from Polytechnic 'A' explained and I quote

> *"The public relations unit of the polytechnic is yet to be equipped for it to assess*
> *itself internally before stepping out from its wall. The Polytechnic is also yet to*
> *come to terms with real value of the public relations units and the role they need to*
> *perform".*

Interviewee in Polytechnic 'B' conceded that,

> *We are on the right path but cannot conclude that all is well for the polytechnics in*
> *terms of positioning of the polytechnics in the minds of the publics. We must*
> *position the polytechnics in such a way that the public will see the public*
> *polytechnics as the same as other state institutions in terms of all the services that*

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the polytechnics offer. This may be a sure way to change public attitudes towards the polytechnics, its products and enhance its image.

Public relations officers of the polytechnics were asked whether the public relations unit has been able to change completely the attitudes and perceptions of the public towards the polytechnics and their products.

Public relations officer of Polytechnic 'A' explained:

> *"Much has not been done in changing the attitudes and perceptions of the public towards the polytechnic but gradually certain degree of positive imprints is being made with respect to people's perception and attitude towards polytechnic education. Generally, the public is getting to know that the polytechnics have different orientations with respect to the delivery of education as compared to the Universities. But more will be required from the public relations unit to engrave the positive imprints made on the publics minds in a broader concept".*

On the other hand, respondent from Polytechnic 'B' emphasized and I quote:

> *"Public relations practices in the polytechnics are developing and continue to dispel misconceptions about the nature of polytechnic education for all to embrace the unique and critical role specifically reserved for polytechnic education for consolidation of national development is an ongoing process".*

Finally, public relations officers were asked to share their views on the problems they faced in promoting polytechnics in Ghana. This question brought to bear the real difficulties they faced when undertaking public relations activities within and outside the polytechnics. Interviewees contended:

> *"Every system has its own difficulties of which the public relations units of polytechnics are no exception. The participants further echoed that the most challenging issue facing public relations units are finance to run the unit effectively, recognition within the polytechnics and office space to carry out public relations activities".*

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5. Discussion of Findings

The narratives from the interviewees showed that public relations practices is critical and have an impact on the polytechnics.

Respondents maintained that public relations unit is important in the polytechnics and critical for the development of the polytechnics. Therefore, public relations unit helps promote polytechnic education as well as educating the public on the philosophy of the polytechnic and also creates avenue for the public to support the activities of the institution. The findings conform to Moore and Kalupa (2007) study that for an organization to communicate to its target audiences require a middleman who will perform this function effectively and efficiently to have impact on customers who are the backbone of the organization. This means that public relations in the polytechnics act as the eyes of both internal and external publics and improves the avenue for academic and social development (Kotler & Mindak, 2000).

Public relations units of the polytechnics see trust as critical and key in maintaining and attracting students to the institutions and to deliver undiluted services to students enhances trust. Hence if trust is managed correctly between the polytechnics and the publics as a trustable and credible partner (Merenda, 2004), the polytechnics' reputation will be secured. This supports the literature that trust is a crucial factor which affects relationships between publics and organizations (Huang, 2001). Thus, in public relations practice, if public trust is lost, it becomes very difficult and sometimes impossible for an institution to regain it (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Public relations units of the polytechnics studied believed that they have put measures in place to help educate the publics about the strategic role of polytechnics and contribution of its students to the nation's development; however, there is the misconception about polytechnic education and their products. These misconceptions have impacted negatively on the students' enrolment. According to Duncan (2002) and Jobber (2001) managing misconceptions and perceptions of an institution is critical to public relations in its activities. Hence, to manage misconceptions about polytechnics and also boost patronage by the publics, public relations professionals must have the

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ability to monitor, measure, evaluate and plan content which is critical for public relations practices and serves as a ground for competitive advantage (Philips, 2001).

Interviewees from the polytechnics studied contend that the polytechnics cannot be used as money making venture, do not employ unqualified lecturers and do not admit unqualified students. They further stressed that the polytechnics are being monitored by the National Accreditation Board and will never break the laid down criteria to create a negative image and publicity for the polytechnics and their students. This finding is based on the perception of the public towards the polytechnics. This is in line with a study by Tellis (2004) who observed that the challenge for marketing communications is to convince consumers to change their perception of a brand.This means that perception is the result of communication flow (Duncan, 2002). Hence, knowledge of how customers acquire and use information from external sources is essential to marketers in formulating communication strategies (Belch & Belch (2004). Consequently, to manage the negative perception of the polytechnics, public relations professionals should create favourable news about the institution, products and people (Kotler et al., 2002). This support the study conducted by Heskov and Pirožek (2003) who found that the success of the new detached campus is accredited to skillful public relations.

Public relations units of the polytechnics studied conceded that changing the attitudes and perceptions of the publics towards the polytechnics is crucial for public relations. The units believed that certain degree of positive imprints has been made with respect to people's perception and attitude towards polytechnic education and that the polytechnics have different orientation with respect to the delivery of education as compared to the universities. However, the respondents maintained that more is required from the public relations unit to engrave the positive imprints made on the publics minds in a broader concept. This brought to the fore that much have not been done to change the attitudes and perceptions of the publics towards polytechnic education. According to Clow and Baack (2007) and Well *et al.,* (2005) one of the purposes of public relations practices is to make changes in the public's knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related

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to an organization and its activities. This confirms that to change attitudes of targeted publics towards an institution is a key function of public relations. Therefore, the purpose of public relations is to promote awareness of the client's services, stimulate and build relationships between customers, companies and their brands (McDonough & Egolf, 2003) in order to change attitudes and positioning or repositioning the institution (Well *et al.,* 2005).

Finally, the study explored the problems faced by public relations officers in promoting polytechnics in Ghana. The public relations units in the polytechnics studied revealed that lack of finance to run the unit effectively and recognition affect their activities and this is not consistent with views from the extant literature (Nelson, 2003; Akintoye, 2000). Thus, lack of finance and recognition of public relations units in the polytechnics' limit the power of the units to position and change the attitude of the publics towards the polytechnics'. This indicates that money plays an important role in attracting, retaining and motivating individuals towards higher performance (Sinclair *et al.,* 2005).

6. Managerial Implications

From the study, the public relations units of polytechnics studied believed that they have put measures in place to help educate the publics about the strategic role of polytechnics and contribution of its students to the nation's development. However, there is the misconception about polytechnic education and their products. The study is therefore vital for polytechnics in Ghana.

In view of the above, for the polytechnics to make a significant impact and inform the publics of the philosophy and orientation of the institutions, the public relations units must be made to function effectively. This is in line with the findings by Palmer (2000) that public relations offer several positive impacts that are not found with other promotional tools.

The public relations units of the polytechnics have to undertake research and identify the needs of its relevant publics both within and external to the polytechnic. The public relations unit should

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create a better understanding of polytechnic education necessary for a greater stakeholder support in order to influence or change public perception about polytechnic education.

Hence, public relations unit should be seen as a very important component in the administration of the polytechnics and the needed logistics must be available for the unit to build corporate image and ward off misconceptions about polytechnic education in Ghana.

7. Conclusions

This study relied on the views of public relations practitioners of only two polytechnics in Ghana. The study, however, recommends that further studies be conducted into more polytechnics. Additionally, further studies should be conducted into management views on the importance of public relations activities in polytechnics to give a broader perspective of the relevance of public relations activities in polytechnics in Ghana.

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