

Communication Tools for the Enhancement of Effective Management and Governance at Institutions of Higher Learning: A Case of the University of Venda

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Abstract: The study investigated the contribution of communication tools for the enhancement of effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning with particular focus on the University of Venda. The study was premised on the fact that identification and availability of communication tools influence the effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning. A total of 523 people – staff, students, alumni and council members were sampled in this mixed method study. Hence, data were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The study revealed that stakeholders are rarely consulted in decision-making processes, for them to support the policies. The study also revealed that when stakeholders are poorly informed they may lose confidence in the institution, particularly the executive leadership. The study further revealed that poor bottom-up communication can result in employees failing to understand the expectations of the institutional leadership which could eventually lead to a communication vacuum. It is envisaged that the study will inform policy formulation and implementation processes within the communication space at institutions of higher learning as improved communication would enhance relationship between institutions and their stakeholders.

Keywords: Communication tools, Governance, Institutions of higher learning, Management

1. Introduction

Unavailability of communication tools is considered one of the reasons why both public and private organisations fail to realise their potential. Ironically some institutions fail to effectively communicate with stakeholders despite availability of a range of communication tools. This is often due to the fact that some of these communication tools are not accessible to some stakeholders. Institutions of higher learning such as universities have various communication tools for both internal and external stakeholders. However, the effectiveness of these communication tools is not evident in the day to day institutional operational activities. There seems to be lack of robust evidence demonstrating the impact of communication tools on leadership and governance at institutions of higher learning. The main problem that this study intended to investigate was the contribution of communication tools to the enhancement of effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning, a case of the University of Venda. It examined the power of communication tools in the enhancement of effective management and governance. The study focused on the fact that identification and availability of communication tools have an effect on the

effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning.

2. Literature Review

A key aspect of good governance is how the management and stakeholders relate to each other and the communication tools used. It is practically impossible for institutions to be effective in the absence of processes that enable the two-way exchange of information. The absence of relevant communication tools will make it impossible to know the needs of stakeholders. Unavailability of communication tools leads to lack of consultation and dialogue between the institution and its stakeholders.

For institutions of higher learning management to engage in effective management and governance practices, it is imperative to maintain a healthy communication environment through latest communication tools which include print, electronic as well as social media. Barnes and Walker (2010) stated that effective communication tools are critical for effective management and governance of institutions (Cornellissen, 2010; Walker, 2010; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; Scott, 2017). It may be difficult to imagine how

institutions of higher learning can be responsive to the needs and expectations of stakeholders without effective communication. Executive Management at institutions of higher learning do not seem to understand the importance of clearly defining tools to communicate with various stakeholders (Cornellissen, 2010; Dominick, 2012; Mishra, Boyton & Mishra, 2014; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017). Good internal and external communication is important to keep staff and students as well as other stakeholders informed of news and related information which entails the institution's strategic objectives and values (Welch & Jackson, 2009; Edwards, 2009; Bright, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017). Poor communication with current and prospective students leads to a situation in which the institutions of higher learning are negatively perceived by these stakeholders. There are instances where prospective students complain about lack of feedback from institutions of higher learning, for example, following submission of application for admission, if institutions do not respond to the applicants, they become frustrated when they do not know the outcome of their application if such information is not effectively communicated. The primary cause of this situation is failure to identify appropriate communication tools to communicate with students from various places (Walker, 2015; Bright, 2016; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017).

According to Miller (2006), communication practitioners are expected to build a good corporate image and handle unfavorable rumors or stories. It does however become difficult for communication practitioners to execute their responsibilities effectively if the available communication tools do not enable them to access information. If communication tools do not enable communication practitioners to access information on decisions taken by various committees including Council, they may not have accurate information which might be difficult for them to provide authoritative information to the media. A lack of participation in decision making committees by communication practitioners leads to a situation where communication practitioners learn about activities taking place in their respective institutions through the media (Mishra *et al.*, 2014; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017).

Some internal stakeholders seem to think that they are not taken seriously particularly when decisions that affect them are communicated through e-mails. Such information may sometimes not reach

service or support staff who do not have access to electronic gadgets. This also affects students when decisions that affect them are taken. At the beginning of 2014 academic year, some institutions of higher learning in South Africa experienced student protests when the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) decided to change the process of allocating funds to students without proper and extensive consultation and communication with students. NSFAS did not use communication tools that enabled students to express their views about the decision prior to implementation (Bright, 2017; Scott, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017). This study therefore investigates the contribution of communication tools to the enhancement of effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning.

Poor bottom-up communication can result in employees failing to understand the expectations of the institution which could eventually lead to communication vacuum. Possible communication gap is likely to be filled by speculations. There seems to be lack of robust evidence demonstrating impact of communication tools on governance at institutions of higher learning. While effective communication between the institution and its stakeholders is vital for getting the buy-in of stakeholders which leads to effective management and governance, this has not been realised at the University of Venda. Lack of communication tools may lead to poor consultation and dialogue between the institution and its stakeholders. As a result, stakeholder understanding and support of institutional policies and plans becomes impossible.

3. Research Methods

3.1 Study Area

The study focused on the communication tools for the enhancement of effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning. These communication tools include e-mail, newsletter, campus radio stations, website, communique, meetings, face to face and social networks. The research was based on a case study of the University of Venda which is situated in Vhembe District of Limpopo Province, South Africa. The study was concerned with the communication tools for the enhancement of effective management and governance at the institutions of higher learning. The University of Venda is a comprehensive University situated in Limpopo Province, about 170 km from Polokwane

in South Africa. It comprises of about 1000 staff and more than 15000 students. The University of Venda was chosen as the case because it is one of the 26 public institutions of higher learning in the Republic of South Africa.

3.2 Research Design

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. The qualitative approach is interpretive and seeks to translate and describe and it focuses on words and feelings. Qualitative research is intended to indicate how and why things happen in a particular manner. According to Struwig and Stead (2004) in qualitative research, the emphasis is on concepts and the manner in which people perceive various activities and it is not based on rigid and fixed procedures. The interview was used as one of the primary techniques for collecting data. The interview method enabled the interviewer to probe for more specific answers. The Quantitative approach entails knowledge, opinion or attitude of an individual and it primarily focuses on words and numbers. Struwig and Stead (2004) refers quantitative approach as a form of conclusive research that involves large representative samples and data collection procedures that are structured. According to Dawson (2006) quantitative research is a method that generates statistics making use of questionnaires and the method would enable the researcher to reach a large number of participants. The quantitative research design using questionnaires to collect data was utilised (Struwig & Stead, 2004; Dawson, 2006; Cooper & Schindler, 2006; Walker, 2015; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Niethammer *et al.*, 2017). Some questionnaires were e-mailed to respondents while others were handed to the respondents to complete at their own time without assistance by the researcher. The questionnaire comprises both open and closed ended questions on issues related to communication. Provision was made in the questionnaire, for respondents to provide their experiences about the communication environments as well as relevant communication tools in their respective environments (Babbie, 2013; Peter, 2015; Tronconi, 2016; Dimarco, 2017; Niethammer, 2017).

3.3 Research Population

The population consisted of internal and external stakeholders of the University of Venda and other identified institutions of higher learning, officials of

communication division as well as university alumni, academic, administrative and service staff members, undergraduate and postgraduate students and members of council. Internal stakeholders comprised of staff and students. External stakeholders included current and former members of council, former employees, as well as alumni. These target respondents were identified to participate in the research because of their familiarity with the institutions of higher learning environment.

3.4 Data Collection Methods/Instruments

The study used structured and semi-structured interviews as well as questionnaires that are closed and open ended. Semi structured interview entails a situation whereby the respondents who have relevant information about the proposed research are interviewed. In order to make provision for flexibility and responses that are not anticipated, open ended questions were more effective. This implies that the study also used closed ended questions (Hesse-Bibber, 2010; Babbie, 2013; Walker, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; van Ruler *et al.*, 2017). The interviewer asked the same questions that were adjusted from time to time depending on the background and educational level of the participants. The participants in the semi-structured interviews included service staff, council members and the University alumni. The respondents were identified from target audience that have participated in a field that is relevant to the area of research. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Hesse-Bibber, 2010; Babbie, 2013; Peter, 2015; Dimarco, 2017; Kapur *et al.*, 2017). Questionnaires were used to collect data from targeted stakeholders. This included open ended and closed ended questions. The questions were physically administered by the researcher. The questionnaires were accompanied by a letter outlining the legitimacy of the study. The questionnaires were used to respondents who could read and write which included academic and administrative staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students. In order to encourage the respondents to participate in the research, sensitive questions that were considered not to be necessary were eliminated. In a situation where a respondent was reluctant to participate in the research due to amongst others unavailability of time, it was considered imperative to explain the importance of his/ her participation and to also indicate that the respondent could not be substituted. Respondents were assured of anonymity (Hesse-Bibber, 2010; Peter, 2015; Kapur *et al.*, 2017; Niethammer *et al.*, 2017).

3.5 Sampling

Sampling refers to the process of selecting a portion of the population to represent the entire population. Both purposive and cluster random sampling methods were used. The simple random sampling procedure was used to select respondents who participated in the study. The sample size comprised of 600 questionnaires that were distributed to internal stakeholders and a purposefully selected 10 members of service staff, 3 members of the council and 10 members of alumni participated in the semi-structured interviews. The sample size was put into groups, each group representing various levels of stakeholders. Where a group of people believed to be reliable enough for the study, purposive sampling was used. In order to have accurate results, a statistician was involved in the capturing of data collected through questionnaire. These participants included academic staff, administrative staff, service staff, SRC members, council members, undergraduate and postgraduate students, and alumni.

4. Findings and Discussions

The study revealed that in some instances, available tools of communication are not effectively being utilised. For instance, if a staff member submits a request purchasing an equipment, which is critical for his/her performance, whoever is responsible for processing the order could take very long time without providing feedback to the end users about the progress. Despite availability of communication tools like e-mails, and telephones, some end users had to make follow-up with responsible personnel. The challenge becomes when the end user is told that the equipment had not been delivered due to several varying reasons which in most cases were not communicated promptly. This situation negatively affects the performance of staff in particular and the entire institution in general. In order to avoid this situation, there has to be guidelines on how internal stakeholders should communicate including timelines for providing feedback. It is also of vital importance to have effective monitoring and evaluation system within the institution.

In this study, some students expressed their dissatisfaction about the service which they receive from various departments and schools. For instance, if a student submits an inquiry to a school or department, there are instances where it could take days, weeks and months to resolve such problems. Even

when such problems had been resolved, in order to receive feedback, students have to physically make follow-up with relevant department or school. In this era of technology, provision should be made for students to submit their problems electronically. The use of social media as official communication tools has been recommended by the majority of respondents. In order to monitor effective implementation of the system, there should be mechanisms to monitor such matters electronically.

In order to improve communication with students, the institution should ensure that upon registration, student e-mails are activated. Students should also be encouraged to provide their mobile numbers so that they could be captured onto the system. Communication groups should be created for the purpose of communicating specific messages with relevant target audience. The communication tools that students should use to receive and send messages should be made known to them, more especially during student orientation sessions. Provision should also be made for open communication channels with all stakeholders. This could enable the university management to assess the relevance of available communication tools for the purpose of reviewing their usage.

The study further revealed that internal stakeholders respond to messages as and when they feel like doing that without any sense of urgency. Some respondents indicated that they view and respond to their e-mails at least once per day. Some access their e-mails more than a day or some days later. This could lead to poor performance and ineffective management and governance. In order to address this situation, the institution should make available communication tools to all internal stakeholders and ensure that they are able to access e-mails even through mobile devices which are portable. This implies that internal stakeholders particularly staff could be able to access messages even when they are off campus.

The study also revealed that a very small percentage of internal stakeholders are familiar with available communication strategy and policies. Although some respondents indicated that the information about the policies and other communication tools is brought to their attention during new staff and student orientation sessions, the institution should consider ensuring that through departments and schools, there are campaigns to familiarise all

stakeholders about the availability of communication tools and their effective use.

Most of service staff indicated that they only receive limited information about activities taking place within the institution through their respective supervisors. In order to keep all stakeholders abreast of developments taking place in the institution, it is of vital importance to consider formalising weekly briefing sessions at departmental and or school level. The University management should also consider having regular stakeholder engagement sessions. This could help to ensure that internal stakeholders are familiar with the strategic direction of the institution. The institution should also consider developing a policy or guidelines on stakeholder engagement.

The study also revealed that there are few tools that the University makes use of without having given internal stakeholders the opportunity to make inputs on the determination of such tools of communication. In order to address this matter, the University should list all available tools to communicate information and get buy-in about the use of such tools. For instance, if the agreement between the University management and staff and students is that information will be communicated through e-mails, sms, Univen Radio, website, weekly e-newsletter, the same message should consistently be communicated using all these tools. This implies that if some stakeholders could not receive the message from one or two tools, they would certainly be able to access the message through other tools. It is further recommended that internal stakeholders should receive regular training on communication.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Institutions of higher learning cannot not communicate, hence the identification of accessible communication tools to ensure effective management and governance. The success of any institution depends on the organisation's ability to communicate effectively with its stakeholders, both internal and external, using accessible communication tools. The study found that some stakeholders, particularly internal service staff had limited communication from Management during the performance of their respective responsibilities. During times of change, employees have a mild sense of insecurity. Feelings of isolation further exasperate their sense of insecurity. However, if employees are made to feel a sense

of belonging to the organisation, this gives them a sense of purpose, which in turn has a positive effect on employee morale, productivity and confidence in one's employer as well as effective management and governance. From the analysis, UNIVEN staff revealed that effective internal communication can enhance effective management and governance hence improving productivity in the Institution. It is therefore evident that communication tools contribute immensely to the effective management and governance at institutions of higher learning.

The study revealed that in order to keep internal stakeholders abreast of the developments taking place within the institution, there is a need for open lines of communication between management and staff as well as students. This would further ensure that there is effective sharing of information. This is of paramount importance specially to get the buy-in from all strategic stakeholders. The study revealed that some stakeholders do not have access to communication tools used within the institution, like information communicated through e-mail without making provision for those who do not have access to e-mails like service staff and some students to equally receive the information. It is therefore recommended that the same information should be consistently shared with all stakeholders using relevant tools which are accessible by the respective target audience. The study revealed that some stakeholders receive information through grapevine. In order to control the flow of information through the grapevine, timeous and accurate communication must take place. Line managers should ensure that information is promptly communicated with relevant stakeholders in their respective schools and directorates. The study indicated that communication strategy and policies were not clearly defined and not known. It is therefore the responsibility of the Department of Communications and Marketing at the University of Venda to ensure that there is full participation of all the members in policy formulation and that such policies should be made accessible and known by all. The study revealed that most of the respondents believed that communication at the University of Venda was mainly through e-mails and that the University Monthly Newsletter is only in English which makes it difficult for service staff who cannot read English, to follow and understand the information published in the Newsletter. In order to address this situation, it is important to engage service staff so that they could express their views on how they could read and

understand the articles published in the Newsletter. The study revealed that it was determined that staff specially the service staff preferred face to face communication rather than electronic communication. Through effective use of available and accessible communication tools, internal stakeholders could be motivated to support the vision and mission as well as strategic objectives of the institution.

As indicated in the preceding paragraphs, at the University of Venda, the staff are communicated with mainly through email. In order to improve communication and better understanding of activities taking place within the institution, the University should consider making use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to communicate with staff and students. Electronic, mobile communication tools would be better and more up to date communication tools to use in the future, for effective management and governance at the University of Venda. In order to enhance effective management and governance, it is therefore recommended that the University of Venda should consider the following:

- Development of Stakeholder Engagement/ Relations Policy;
- Development of Social Media Policy;
- Making available the University Communication Strategy to all stakeholders;
- Involvement of Senior Communication Practitioners in decision making committees, including Council;
- Formalisation of regular meetings within schools, directorates and divisions;
- Evaluation of available communication tools and their effectiveness;
- Communication tools awareness campaigns including active involvement of stakeholders in the determination of formal and official communication tools.

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