Stakeholders' Participation in Decision-Making and Conflict Management in Select Tertiary Institutions in Rivers State

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Abstract

The importance of tertiary education in the creation of a knowledge-driven society enjoys global recognition. The general expectation is that products of tertiary education should possess a standard of conduct and learning that is beyond what is held by the ordinary person in the general community. This expectation is challenged in the Nigerian context due to increasing conflicts in tertiary institutions across the country. This study investigated stakeholders' participation in decision-making and conflict management processes in select tertiary institutions in Rivers State. The aim of the study was to investigate the influence of stakeholders' participation in decision-making on conflict management in select tertiary institutions in Rivers State. Among other objectives, the study examined the participation of staff and students of select tertiary institutions in the state in decision-making and conflict management processes. The study was anchored on the Stakeholder theory. Descriptive survey research design was used. A total of 67,060 formed the population. Using the multi-stage sampling procedure, a sample size of 382 was used. Findings of the study showed that the authorities of University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University do not involve staff and students of the institutions in decision-making processes. It was also found out that the non-participation of staff and students of tertiary institutions in Rivers State in decision-making and conflict management processes is the leading cause of conflicts in the institutions. The study recommended, among others, that tertiary institutions in Rivers State should exploit avenues such as meetings, Commission of Enquiries and Departmental/Faculty dialogues to improve stakeholders' relationships and address avoidable conflicts.

Introduction

One of the conditions that constrain the stakeholder paradigm, especially for corporate organisations, is the dynamism of the highly competitive business environment which affects not only operational processes, such as regulatory framework, policy framework, market, competition, etc but also human and material resources. The implication of this changing corporate environment is the anticipation of unusually perplexing situations by corporate organisations time and again. It also implies that corporate organisations must develop tactical management strategies that can functionally respond to events and times. The articulation of certain management strategies and approaches without a careful and continuous stakeholders' identification and profiling could make such strategies illusive in the face of the unexpected.

Beyond identification of organisational stakeholders, is the issue of continual divergence of interests between corporate organisations and their stakeholders. For corporate organisations, there is always the desire to increase efficiency and productivity. Sometimes,

the pursuit of efficiency and productivity could be done without due consideration or concern about the interest of stakeholders that are affected. This is because the pursuit of higher productivity in the workplace often involves higher work input by employees, increased supply and distribution chain by suppliers and distributors and heightened industrial activities in the host environment, among other possibilities. These changes require some compensatory offerings to stakeholders that are affected in the pursuit of higher productivity. With the prevailing job scarcity across many countries, these concerns are often neglected and such neglects oftentimes constitute sources of management-stakeholders' conflicts (McQuarrie, 2003; Withers and Wisinki, 2007).

Tertiary institutions – Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges - which are basically non-profit organisations are not spared management-stakeholders' conflicts. Both staff and students, which can be regarded as primary or key stakeholders of tertiary institutions, constitute major sources of conflicts to many tertiary institutions across the globe.

In Nigeria, for instance, several public tertiary institutions (Federal and State-owned) have encountered not only academic disruptions but also violent protests due to management-staff or management-students conflicts. Many times, these conflicts have been linked to non-acceptance of a decision by stakeholders (particularly staff and students) or the management of conflicts by the authorities of tertiary institutions

Statement of the Problem

Apart from nationwide strikes - either by the academic or non-academic staff of tertiary institutions which have become endemic and the bane of tertiary education in Nigeria, several tertiary institutions in the country encounter internal conflicts. These conflicts not only affect normal academic activities but also sometimes escalate into violent protests, resulting in avoidable deaths and destruction of critical learning infrastructure. Often, internal conflicts in tertiary institutions in Nigeria have been traced to disagreements between the authorities of these institutions and some of their stakeholders, particularly staff and students. Since 2011, for instance, students' violent protests have repeatedly occurred in some tertiary institutions in Rivers State. These protests allegedly stemmed from failure or refusal of management of these institutions to engage stakeholders in meaningful consultation on important issues before decisions are taken.

However, while some tertiary institutions in the country often encounter stakeholders' conflicts, others seem to enjoy relative calm. For instance, while the University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic have lately encountered students' violent protests, other tertiary institutions in the State have been relatively calm. This condition raises the concern for the investigation of stakeholders' participation in decision-making and conflict processes in University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic, especially since conflicts in these institutions have been linked to disagreements arising from decisions by the authorities of such institutions. The question then is: in what ways do managements of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic involve staff and students of the institutions in decision-making and conflict management processes?

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study were to:

1. Investigate stakeholders' participation in decision-making processes in select tertiary institutions in Rivers State;

2.   Investigate stakeholders' participation in conflict management processes in select tertiary institutions in Rivers State; and

3.   Examine the constraints to stakeholders' participation in decision-making and conflict management processes in select tertiary institutions in Rivers State.

Operational Definition of Terms
The definition of these terms was based on their application within the context of this work:

Conflict Management Processes: These involve stages or processes of managing stakeholders' conflicts in tertiary institutions in Rivers State. It also means the processes through which disagreements with given stakeholder groups are resolved in tertiary institutions in Rivers State.

Decision-Making Processes: Decision-making processes involve discussions or meetings at which the authorities of a tertiary institution take decisions that are binding on the stakeholders of the institution.

Participation in decision-making: This is concerned with the engagement of stakeholders of a tertiary institution in decision-making processes.

Tertiary Institution in Rivers State: The term tertiary institutions in Rivers State refers to the institutions in the State involved in this study. They are: University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic.

Literature Review
Participation Theory
According to Midgley, Halls, Hardiman and Narine (1986), the origin of participation theory can be traced to the historical antecedents of community participation, especially with respect to the criticisms that trailed the parameterised modernisation paradigm which propagated the application of development programmes of the North by the Third World countries in order to get developed. Participation implies the engagement of stakeholders - people, groups, communities, etc in the formulation and implementation of programmes that should affect their interests. In other words, it involves the engagement of individuals or groups whose interest can affect or can be affected by an undertaking (Midgley, Halls, Hardiman and Narine, 1986). Bondenave (1994) cited in Asadu (2009) states that the participatory approach involves the process in which participants - individuals, groups, etc have the freedom to express their views, ideas, feelings and experiences. This is so since participation involves a collective action that is targeted at solving problems. Participatory decision-making or project formulation and implementation also enhance greater acceptance and efficient adoption or use of the project (Kolavalli and Kerr, 2000).

The participation theory has relevance for this study since participation in decision-making addresses disagreements or resistances that characterise decision implementation due to non-participation of stakeholders during decision-making processes.

Defining Organisational Stakeholders
Before examining the groups that constitute organisational stakeholders, it is important to establish the understanding of what is meant by a stake. A stake is a right, share or claim an individual or a group has in an activity (Heath, 2005). It is the claim or a right in an undertaking.

The right may be a legal claim of ownership or share in an undertaking. It may also be an ethical claim of interest in something (Kotler, Maon and Lindgreen, 2012). What this means is that apart from the legal claim of ownership which can be asserted by a particular shareholder group, for instance, business organisations identify other kinds of claims or interests different stakeholder groups have in the organisation. It could be a claim to certain kinds of treatment or benefit. Individuals and groups who make these claims (whether legal or ethical) are regarded as stakeholders.

Organisational stakeholders, therefore, are individuals or groups who can assert either legal claims of ownership or other forms of stake on an organisation (Kotler, Maon and Lindgreen, 2012). According to Heath (2005), stakeholders can be located within and outside the organisation. They include shareholders, employees, management, investors, host communities, customers, the mass media, regulatory authorities, government, financial bodies, competitors, etc. Following the stakes these individuals or groups hold, they can impact or can be impacted by the activities of the organisation. The list of organisational stakeholders has been expanded to include future generations, non-human species (animals) and the natural environment (Heath, 2005; Kotler, Maon amd Lindgreen, 2012).

The Concept of Stakeholders' Participation
On a general sense, participation means taking part in something. In other words, to participate means to take part in an activity or undertaking. Stakeholders' participation means the participation or engagement of concerned stakeholders in the planning and execution of a project (Forrester, Swartling and Lonsdale, 2008). It also means seeking the collaboration and cooperation of relevant individuals and groups in decision-making and implementation. Ratnam, (2006) shares this view as he identifies the goals of participation as: Communication - to give and get information; Consultation - to obtain other people's views; Participation - to let the people concerned take part in taking decisions; and Joint-Decision-making - management taking decisions together with workers/unions (p. 534).

By describing the participatory decision-making approach as a process that involves consultation, collection and collation of participants' ideas, it means that participation does not simply consist in the invitation of stakeholders to a decision-making process or project planning. In other words, participation should go beyond mere presence of concerned stakeholders at the decision-making sessions. White (1994) argues that "participation is kaleidoscopic; it changes its colour and shape at the will of hands in which it is held… The Kaleidoscope analogy fits because participation is a complex and dynamic phenomenon, seen from the eye of the beholder and shaped by the hand of the power holder" (p. 16). What this means is that calling stakeholders together may not simply translate into participation. It also means that there may be absence of participation in what is regarded as a participatory process and this can result in conflicts in corporate organisations. Thus, White (1994) makes a distinction between pseudo-participation and genuine participation.

Methodology
The research design used for this study was descriptive survey design. A descriptive survey documents existing conditions or attitudes concerning a given phenomenon or situation (Wimmer and Dominick, 2011). The population of the study was 67,060. This figure comprises the population of management, staff and students of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic. Following this population, a sample of 382 was used. The sample is based on the sampling system of Keyton (2001). The measuring instrument was the questionnaire.

The sampling system used for the study was the multi-stage sampling procedure. The first stage introduced the stratified proportionate sampling technique which was used to allocate samples to the institutions that formed the scope of the study based on their percentage representation in the overall population. Based on the sampling system, the institutions received samples in the following order: University of Port Harcourt 187 samples; Rivers State University 137 samples; and Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic 58 samples. The next stage involved the stratification of the population of each institution into: Academic staff, non-academic staff and students. The population of the different strata determined the allocation of samples to each stratum. The actual administration of copies of questionnaire to each stratum involved the convenience sampling technique.

Data Presentation

In order to obtain data for this study, 382 copies of the questionnaire were administered to the sample of the study. Of this number, a total of 375 (98.16%) copies were properly filled and returned. The other 7 (1.84%) copies were not returned. Data analysis was based on the copies that were properly filled and returned. Data were presented in statistical tables using weighted mean score based on the five point Likert scale.

Table 1: Stakeholders' participation in decision-making processes in tertiary institutions in Rivers State

S/N	Questionnaire items	Institutions	Responses					Total	WMS	Remark
			SA	A	U	SD	D			
1.	The Management of your institution allows the participation of staff/students in decision-making	Uniport		13	26	138	6	412	2.2	Rejected
		Rivers State University	9	3	12	103	9	308	2.2	Rejected
		Ken Saro-Wiwa Poly	19	14	9	13	1	205	3.5	Accepted
2.	Staff/students' participation in decision-making in your institution is encouraged through regular meetings with Management	Uniport	6	9	4	158	6	136	0.7	Rejected
		Rivers State University	8	5	14	104	5	318	2.3	Rejected
		Ken Saro-Wiwa Poly	4	16	19	17		175	3.0	Accepted
3.	Staff/students also participate in Commission of Enquiries set up by Management	Uniport			27	149	7	386	2.0	Rejected
		Rivers State University	7		11	110	8	296	2.1	Rejected
		Ken Saro-Wiwa Poly	11	5	16	22	2	169	2.9	Rejected

Data presented in Table 1 indicate that the Managements of University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University do not involve staff and students of the institutions in decision-making processes. This is based on the negative weighted mean scores obtained by the items that sought the participation of staff and students of the institutions in decision-making processes. In contrast, data presented in the table indicate that the Management of Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic allows the participation of staff and students of the institution in decision-

making processes. The table also shows that one of the avenues through which the Management of Ken Saro-Wiwa involves staff and students of the institution in decision-making processes is through regular meetings with these stakeholders. This is based on 3.0 weighted mean score obtained by the item that investigated the use of meetings to encourage the participation of staff and students of the institution in decision-making processes.

Table 2: Stakeholders' participation in conflict management processes in tertiary institution in Rivers State

S/N	Questionnaire items	Institutions	Responses					Total	WMS	Remark
			SA	A	U	SD	D			
4.	Your institution has encountered some conflicts since last five years	Uniport	116	23	44			804	4.3	Accepted
		Rivers State University	119	17				663	4.8	Accepted
		Ken Saro-Wiwa Poly	56					280	5	Accepted
5.	Conflicts in your institution often relate to decision-making or decision implementation	Uniport	138	19	26			844	4.6	Accepted
		Rivers State University	92	13	18		13	579	4.2	Accepted
		Ken Saro-Wiwa Poly	29	14	3		10	220	3.9	Accepted
6.	The Management of your institution allows the participation of staff/students in conflict management processes	Uniport		13	43	10	26	409	2.2	Rejected
		Rivers State University			36	92	8	300	2.2	Rejected
		Ken Saro-Wiwa Poly		6	11	39		135	2.4	Rejected

Data presented in Table 2 indicate that Managements of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ken Saro-Wiwa Polytechnic do not allow the participation of staff and students of the institutions in conflict management processes. This is based on the negative weighted mean score obtained by the item that investigated the participation of staff and students of the institutions in conflict management processes. Data presented in the table also indicate that conflicts in the institutions often relate to decision-making or decision implementation.

Table 3: Constraints to stakeholders' participation in decision-making and conflict management processes in tertiary institutions in Rivers State

S/N	Questionnaire items	Institutions	Responses					Total	WMS	Remark
			SA	A	U	SD	D			
7.	The Management of your institution allows the participation of staff/students in decision and conflict management processes.	Uniport		19	43	101	20	427	2.3	Rejected
		Rivers State University		11	21	96	8	299	2.1	Rejected
		Ken Saro-Wiwa Poly	6		9	22	19	120	2.1	Rejected
8.	You find it difficult to participate in conflict management processes due to other academic/official activities	Uniport		5	1	141	37	340	1.8	Rejected
		Rivers State University				131	5	267	1.9	Rejected
		Ken Saro-Wiwa Poly	2	4		40	10	116	2.0	Rejected

Data presented in Table 3 indicate that the constraint to participatory decision-making and conflict management in tertiary institutions in Rivers State is that Managements of the institutions do not involve staff and students in decision-making and conflict management processes. This is based on the negative weighted mean score obtained by the item that investigated the constraints to participatory decision-making and conflict management in tertiary institutions in the State.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion was done in the order the objectives of the study were organised.

Objective 1: Investigate stakeholders' participation in decision-making processes in select tertiary institutions in Rivers State

Responses to this objective indicate that Managements of University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University do not involve staff and students of the institutions in decision-making processes. This is based on the negative weighted mean score obtained by the item that investigated the participation of staff and students of the institutions in decision-making processes. In contrast, responses to the objective also indicate that the Management of Ken Saro-wiwa Polytechnic involves staff and students of the institution in decision-making processes. This is based on 3.5 weighted mean score obtained by the item that investigated the participation of staff and students of the institution in decision-making processes. Data presented in Table 1 also indicate that the Management of Ken Saro-wiwa Polytechnic encourages the participation of staff and students of the institution in decision-making through regular meetings. Conversely, the table shows that Managements of University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University do not hold regular meetings with staff and students of the institutions. This is based on the negative weighted mean scores of 0.7 and 2.3 obtained by the item that investigated the use of meetings by Managements of the institutions to strengthen ties with stakeholders of the institution.

The non-involvement of staff and students of University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University by Managements of the institutions is not only a threat to the implementation

of decisions in the institution but also to peace and mutual understanding between Management and stakeholders. This is especially if particular decisions run contrary to the views or opinions of staff and students of the institutions. That is, if stakeholders do not agree with a decision, they may work hard to implement it, if they do not have a sufficient force to resist the decision (Miller, 2006). This condition underscores the importance of identification and adoption of the stakeholders' management approach by corporate organisations (Heath, 2005).

Objective 2: Investigate stakeholders' participation in conflict management processes in select tertiary institutions in Rivers State

Responses to this objective indicate that Managements of University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ken Saro-wiwa Polytechnic do not involve staff and students of the institutions in conflict management processes. This is based on the weighed mean scores of 2.2, 2.2, and 2.4, respectively obtained by the item that investigated the participation of staff and students of the institutions in conflict management processes. Responses to the objective also indicate that conflict in the institutions often relate decision-making or decision implementation and that conflicts in the institutions sometimes escalate due to poor management of conflicts.

That conflict in tertiary institutions in Rivers State sometimes escalate into major crises is not surprising. This is because the non-involvement of concerned stakeholders in the management of conflicts is already a threat to genuine reconciliation and restoration of mutual understanding. Conflict management processes involve negotiations between the contending parties or arbitration if the parties fail to resolve their differences through negotiations (Singh, 2008; Hames, 2012). Whether it is negotiation or arbitration or any other conflict management approach that is used in managing a conflict, what is fundamental is that parties involved in the conflict must approve and functionally participate in the process (Uduodo, 2009).

Objective 3: Examine the constraints to stakeholders' participation in decision-making and conflict management processes in select tertiary institutions in Rivers State

Responses to this objective indicate that the constraints to stakeholders' participation in decision-making and conflict management processes in University of Port Harcourt, Rivers State University and Ken Saro-wiwa Polytechnic is the non-involvement of staff and students of the institutions in decision-making and conflict processes by Managements of the institutions. This is based on the weighted mean scores of 2.3, 2.1, and 2.1, respectively obtained by the item that investigated the participation of staff and students of the institutions in decision-making and conflict management processes.

The non-involvement of stakeholders (staff and students) of tertiary institutions in Rivers State and indeed any corporate organisation in decision-making and conflict management processes is a threat to mutual understanding and enduring stakeholders' cooperation. In fact, no genuine relationship exists between interdependent groups without genuine participatory processes that allow frank expression of people's views, opinions, and even dissensions on issues or circumstances (Udoudo, 2009; Walker and Johnson, 2000). This condition underscores the argument of Heath (2005), in his articulation of the stakeholder theory, that corporate organisations that develop strong ties with different stakeholders are likely to hold a strong competitive advantage over those that demonstrate less concern to their stakeholders.

Conclusion

The Managements University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University do not involve staff and students of the institutions in decision-making and conflict management processes. As a corollary, the non-participation of these stakeholders in decision-making and conflict management processes is the leading cause of stakeholder conflicts in these institutions (University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University). Conversely, Ken Saro-wiwa Polytechnic enjoys relative calm due to the involvement of staff and students of the institution in decision-making processes.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations will be useful:

1. The authorities of University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University should embrace the involvement of staff and students of the institutions in decision-making processes. This is to improve stakeholders' relationship and prevent conflicts.
2. All tertiary institutions in Rivers State should ensure the participation of concerned stakeholders in conflict management processes. This will create the atmosphere for frank expression of stakeholders' views or grievances and to prevent conflicts form escalating into serious crises. Stakeholders' participation in conflict management processes will also ensure the confidence of different stakeholders in the process.
3. Tertiary institutions in Rivers State should exploit avenues such as regular meetings, stakeholders' participation in Commission of Enquiries and Departmental/Faculty dialogues to improve stakeholders' relationships and address avoidable conflicts.

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