

EMAIL AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS POTENT TOOLS FOR ORIENTATION AND STAFF-STUDENTS INTERACTION:

A Case of the Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar

DR MFON EYO

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATIONS,
GUIDANCE AND COUNSELLING
UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR
CALABAR, NIGERIA

ABSTRACT

This study sought to establish email and social media as potent tools for orientation and staff-students interaction, using the case of the Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar. It was an expository study which relied on literature review and observation in answering the four research questions that were formulated to guide the study. The literature search was done by relying on Google Scholar academic database and the Google search engine. The findings of the study indicated that orientation service was very relevant to university students as those who participated actively were empirically proven to achieve greater academic success, and able to persevere the challenges of the university system. The findings also indicated that cordial staff-students relationship had positive significance to the university community; and that the Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar was successfully utilizing email and social media for effective management of staff-students relationship. The study also proffered suggestions to the stakeholders to ensure that the utilization of email and social media in orientation and staff-students interaction was efficient and successful.

Keywords: email, social media, orientation, staff-students relationship, interactive forum

Introduction

Orientation is a specialized service of the guidance programme aimed at helping new comers to adapt and function optimally in a new environment. The core activity of orientation involves providing relevant, valid and updated information to the client to help the client to adjust to a new setting. It is very useful in the university system as it helps the new students who are

transiting from home or secondary school to the university to settle in and thrive in the new surroundings. The usefulness of orientation to the new students is in three basic perspectives viz transition process, academic integration, and personal/social integration (Scagnoli, n.d). All these perspectives are very relevant to the students. Though face to face approach is the widely adopted method of delivery, there is growing awareness on the need to have online orientation either to replace the face to face approach or to complement the physical orientation service (Scagnoli, n.d; Bozarth, Chapman and LaMonica, 2004; Wozniak, Pizzica and Mahony, 2012).

The concepts of orientation, information service and Staff-Students interaction in the university system are quite related. Indeed, staff-student relationship management is a crucial aspect of the teaching-learning process. Efficient management of such relationship helps the students to achieve more, while eliminating conflict in the teaching-learning environment. It is instructive to note that conflict in the university system sometimes results to industrial action, riot, loss of lives and destruction of property, if it is not well managed (Fatile and Adejuwon, 2011). Crises in the university system can be averted through effective information dissemination and efficient management of staff-students relationship.

Considering the significance of orientation and the proactive and positive effects of efficient management of staff-students relationship, management of universities usually take steps to provide orientation service and create platforms for staff-students interactive forum which helps in ensuring a smooth and cordial staff-students relationship. Orientation service and staff-students interactive forum are always done through physical contact, which is cumbersome, costly and time consuming. Unarguably, the advent of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has changed the face of support structure in the universities. Emphasis is gradually changing from the traditional face to face interaction and hardcopy notices to virtual interaction on the internet, and adoption of social media as platforms for information dissemination.

According to Mansfield (2010), the most frequently stated benefits of using social media in higher education include being present where the stakeholders are, cost-effectiveness, time-efficiency, and building and enhancing relationships. With respect to being where the students are, researchers have reported that university students are always on the internet (Edegoh, Asemah and Ekanem, 2013; Smith & Caruso, 2010). Meeting them on the internet and disseminating information through such

platform will have the benefit of getting easily to the target audience. Selwyn (2012) argues that social media has gained increasing significance in higher education. This is because of its wide acceptance and high patronage by the university students. In the United States for instance, data collected from 36,950 students from 126 United States universities and one Canadian university, by EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research (ECAR) showed that of the 90% of students who use social networking sites, 97% admitted being Facebook users. This 97% reported actively engaging on the site daily (Smith & Caruso, 2010).

More so, email, derived from electronic mail, one of the most widely used services of the internet, can be utilized effectively in staff-students interaction. It is built on the strength of being able to deliver text, audio, video, photo etc to any person within split of seconds irrespective of where the recipient is on the face of the earth. This is in addition to its appeal of confidentiality, as the interaction between the sender and the receiver of email is always confidential to them. This article uses the case of the Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar to demonstrate the effectiveness of using email and social media as channels of delivery of orientation service, and effective management of staff-student relationship.

Research purposes and questions

This study was guided by four research purposes which were presented as research questions. It was an expository study aimed at exemplifying email and social media as potent tools for orientation and staff-students interaction. Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the relevance of orientation to university students?
2. What is the significance of staff-students interaction in a university community?
3. How does the Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar utilize email and social media for orientation and staff-students interaction?
4. What are the roles of the stakeholders in achieving the objectives of orientation and staff-students interaction through email and social media?

Research method

The study was a descriptive and expository study that relied on review of

related literature in answering the research questions. The literature search and review provided the relevant conceptual and empirical frameworks to provide answers to the questions posed for the study. The literature search was done by relying on *Google Scholar* academic database and the *Google* search engine. Keywords used for the search included the following words, their derivatives, and phrases: counselling, orientation, university, students, email, social media, staff-students interaction etc. Any empirical and conceptual literature that was seen as relevant to answering the research questions was picked and reviewed for this study. Observation was also adopted in answering the third research question.

Results and Discussion

Research question 1: What is the relevance of orientation to university students?

Orientation programme is one amongst the channels of delivery of guidance programme. It is usually targeted at new entrants in an organization or community, with the objective of helping such new entrants to get acquainted with the new environment and be able to function optimally. In the university community, this programme is usually organized annually; usually featuring staff-students interactive forum, talk shop and presentations, amongst other activities, to help the newly admitted undergraduates in their transition to a university life with its attendant challenges.

Generally, the benefits of orientation to the participating students include creating a strong foundation for the students to launch their academic pursuit; creating awareness on the intertwined nature of physical, social and even academic life on campus and their inextricable effects on the academic achievement of the students; exposing the students to the school system, including its administrative machinery, policies and regulations, health services, effective use of the library, available extra curricula activities, amongst others. Orientation service usually involves interaction with students' affairs professional, which is a form of staff-students interaction. Findings of a study by Martin and Seifert (2011) indicated that such "interactions with student affairs professionals were associated positively with growth on measures of need for cognition, attitude toward literacy, and academic motivation."

Apart from the traditional role of helping newcomers to adjust to a new setting, studies have revealed that orientation increases the likelihood of the first year undergraduates not abandoning their studies but staying

throughout their first year in the university; and that those who take active part in the programme have greater academic success, withstand academic stress and feel more satisfied with their overall campus experience (University of Florida). In a study by Owusu, Tawiah, Sena-Kpeglo and Onyame (2014) aimed at finding out the impact of orientation on the academic performance of undergraduate students, the researchers used questionnaire to gather data from a sample of 250 students in Level 200 from the University of Cape Coast. The result of the study indicated that participation in orientation significantly and positively impacted on students' academic performance; and that the difference, between Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) scores of those who participated in orientation and those who did not, was statistically significant.

From the general objectives of Orientation service to the empirical evidence of the relationship between orientation and academic performance of the undergraduates, it is safe to conclude that orientation is very relevant in the university school system.

Research question 2: What is the significance of staff-students interaction in a university community?

The university community is a potential ground for conflicts. This is simply borne out of the fact that the community is made up of people with diverse ideas, interest, motives, values, approaches and personalities. Conflict in the university is usually between the university administration and staff, or administration and students (Adeniyi, 2001). If potential conflict is not nipped in the bud, it may grow into unhealthy situations like industrial action, riot, closure of the university, prolonged academic calendar, loss of lives or destruction of property. This explains the imperative of identifying potential crises and averting such crises.

As a social system, it is not strange to have conflict in the university; what is important is to devise strategies to manage such conflict. In a study by Omemu and Oladunjoye (2013) aimed at identifying strategies for managing conflicts in tertiary institutions in Nigeria, "smoothing" was reported as a strategy. According to these researchers, smoothing "involves both parties providing mutual support and appeal to the need for co-operation while trying to keep further conflict from emerging." This can be understood as dialogue amongst the stakeholders. This suggests that providing a forum for interaction and dialogue is a potent strategy for averting crises in the university.

Furthermore, Richardson and Radloff (2014) reported in their findings that staff-students interaction is a necessity rather than an option. They continued in their report that frequent staff-students interactions led to higher level of engagement on the part of the students, raised their level of overall satisfaction, and lowered the rate of dropping out of the university. The findings of the study also indicated that staff also benefitted from such staff-students interactions as they gained insights into students' learning experiences, thus providing such staff with ideas to serve the students better. According to these researchers, staff and students should be seen as allies in the learning environment.

It is evident from the foregoing that staff-students interaction helps to eliminate tension between the stakeholders in the university system; helps to avoid possible crises; ensures stability of the university system; as well as safeguarding the sanctity of human lives. Such interactions also boost students' confidence, help to reduce the incidence of dropping out of school and improve the level of satisfaction of the students with the university system.

Research question 3: How does the Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar utilize email and social media for orientation and staff-students interaction?

The Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar is fully aware of the overwhelming benefits of staff-students interaction; including providing platform for grievances to be sorted out and providing orientation and information that will guide the students in their academic pursuit. However, such interaction, if restricted to physical contact only, is constrained by very limited number of times it is held, thus hindering the achievement of the overall objectives of the interaction. To make the interaction regular and more convenient to staff and students, the use of email and social media comes in handy.

Email and social media have been adopted and utilized for orientation, information dissemination and staff-students interaction by the Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar. The choice of email was premised on its speed, versatility, confidentiality and convenience. On the other hand, Facebook was adopted as the social media platform as a result of its global presence, popularity, ease of use, convenience and acceptability. As at March 2015, Facebook was reputed to have 936 million daily active users, 798 million mobile daily active users, 1.44 billion monthly active users and 1.25 billion mobile monthly active users (Facebook). In a study by Edegoh,

Asemah and Ekanem (2013) Facebook was described as an important medium that can be used for relationship management among students of tertiary institutions. The authors added that social networks have become a large part of students' lives in today's world; and that such social networks are a constant presence in the lives of students. Interestingly too, studies have revealed that university students are receptive to interacting with staff electronically; they are reported to consider the use of the electronic social network as beneficial for seeking help with ease and convenience (Amador and Amador, 2014). The foregoing implies that Facebook enjoys a huge global patronage; the students are always on social media platforms; and that the students are receptive to interacting with staff through this social media. This therefore makes the strategy of reaching out to the students through the social media an effective one.

The utilization of email and social media in orientation, information dissemination and staff-students interaction is a novel introduction by the management of the Faculty of Education, University of Calabar. Before now, the only avenue of communicating with the students was via physical contact, which was burdensome, time consuming and quite irregular. The prevalent practice was that at the beginning of a session, the university management would organize orientation service for the new students; where the students are briefed on general life and activities on campus, with hints on how they could succeed in the university. This approach seemed to be less effective as the whole school was usually the target, and with a huge population. Such orientation was also usually generic, and not targeted at any Faculty or Department. Though orientation had been given in such a case, the students were usually still in dire need of orientation, especially on Faculty related or specific matters.

The approach for staff-students relationship management usually involved meeting the affected staff physically, and organizing a staff-students interactive forum, which was not always regular. The students who had ideas, complaint or suggestions, had to visit the management of the Faculty to be able to express themselves. This undoubtedly was not convenient for any of the parties. It was therefore a big relief when the management of the Faculty of Education launched official Faculty email address and Faculty Facebook page to address this challenge.

The email address was to provide the students with a platform to reach out to management of the Faculty with ease; as they could do this from anywhere without having to go to the administrative department of the Faculty. The students were encouraged to seek for clarification, offer

suggestions, or complain on any matter affecting them. They were also promised prompt attention to their emails. Though the email was created earlier, it was formally presented to the students in a staff-students interactive forum which held in mid 2015. It was observed that barely 24 hours after the public presentation of this medium, the students had already started adopting same as mails had started pouring in for the attention of Faculty management.

The Faculty Facebook page is another innovative approach adopted by the management of the Faculty to enhance a seamless staff-students relationship management. It serves to allow the Faculty to disseminate information to the stakeholders, while also allowing the stakeholders to express themselves. The Facebook page was also publicly presented to the Faculty stakeholders in mid 2015. The acceptance of this platform by the stakeholders could be assessed by the steep hike in the percentage of stakeholders that "liked" and joined the Faculty on Facebook. Barely 72 hours after the public presentation, the "new page likes" increased by 526.7%, while the "total page likes" increased by 264.7%. The level of interaction amongst the students on the Faculty Facebook page, as observed, was active. It was observed that students made enquiry on the Faculty Facebook page and other students provided correct answer to such enquiry. For instance, a student wrote a comment on the Faculty Facebook page requesting for the Faculty email address; barely 10 minutes after, another students provided the correct email address of the Faculty. Pictures of the inauguration ceremony of the then newly elected Executive Council of the Faculty students' association was also posted for the benefit of those who could not make it to the ceremony.

These early adoption, utilization and beehive of activities going on in the platforms are evidence of acceptability of the platforms provided by the Faculty management for orientation, information dissemination, staff-students relationship management and even students-students interactions.

Research question 4: What are the roles of the stakeholders in achieving the objectives of orientation and staff-students interaction through email and social media?

The provision of email and social media platforms for managing staff-students relationship is done to achieve convenience, ease of accessibility, efficiency and timeliness in interactions between the stakeholders. For these objectives to be achieved, stakeholders should be willing and

committed to ensuring that these platforms are effectively utilized in orientation, information dissemination and staff-students relationship management. Embracing these platforms and keeping to the basic tenets of their utilization is the least expected of the stakeholders.

Acceptability of the email option is manifested by the students or staff sending mails to management on issues, complaints or even suggestions on how to move the Faculty forward. Where there is no such communication coming from the students, then the email option would not have served its intended purpose. On the part of the management of the Faculty, prompt acknowledgement of mails received would be a convincing proof that management is actually interested in interacting with the students through this medium. This will further encourage other stakeholders to reach out to management through this avenue. In addition, Faculty management has the responsibility of ensuring prompt, transparent and satisfactory treatment of complaints or issues raised by the students. If otherwise, Faculty management will lose their integrity before the students, who would no longer consider it necessary to send any complaint to management. Lastly, Faculty management should ensure timely communication of feedback to the relevant stakeholders including the petitioner, after the issues raised have been resolved.

The social media platform cannot serve its intended purpose if the stakeholders do not put it to use. In doing this however, stakeholders must be conscious of the fact that the social media is a dual-edged sword, which can make or mar the image of the Faculty. It is therefore expected of all stakeholders to exercise restraint on the contents of their posting on the Facebook page. It would be uncharitable for any stakeholder to post obscene and vulgar contents on the page, or even use uncouth language in his or her expression. Stakeholders should note that the Faculty Facebook page has a global audience; therefore everyone should demonstrate circumspection in their choice of what is posted on the Facebook page.

Besides, stakeholders are highly encouraged to keep the Facebook platform active by posting educative, motivational, entertaining, news worthy contents etc on the site. These should however be done by both the staff and students. If the students, for instance, notice that the platform is not having the active involvement and contributions from members of staff, they may lose faith on the platform; and the essence of having it as an interactive forum may have been defeated. In addition, every stakeholder must ensure that whatever information is posted on the site is factual, valid, updated and relevant. This would boost the confidence of stakeholders to

always go to the site for information. Anything to the contrary would change the status of the site to a rumour mongering site where displayed information is to be ignored as such information is not likely to be factual, valid and updated.

Conclusion

A milestone of the 21st century is the ability to use ICT to do things that were hitherto done manually. ICT has therefore changed the fabric of the mechanism of the society. This study x-rayed the utilization of ICT, specifically email and Facebook, in giving orientation service and managing staff-students relationship in the Faculty of Education of the University of Calabar. Literature search has indicated that these can be achieved. Consequently, such success depends on the commitment of the stakeholders in attaining same. Suggestions were therefore given to the different stakeholders in the university system to ensure that the use of email and social media for orientation and staff-students interaction and relationship management was a success.

REFERENCES

- Adeniyi, S. (2001). Conflict Management. Ibadan: Ade-Ojo Press. Cited in Omemu, F., & Oladunjoye, P. (2013). Strategies for Managing Conflict in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Foundations and Management*, 1(2), 177-189. Retrieved on 02/06/2015 from http://www.ijefm.com/IJEFM%20Vol.,%201_2_-Fekix%20&%20Patrick.pdf
- Amador, P. & Amador, J. (2014). Academic advising via Facebook: Examining student help seeking. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 21, 9 – 16. Retrieved on 05/06/2015 from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S109675161300047X>
- Bozarth, J., Chapman, D. D., & LaMonica, L. (2004). Preparing for Distance Learning: Designing An Online Student Orientation Course. *Educational Technology and Society*, 7 (1), 87-106. Retrieved on 05/06/2015 from http://ifets.info/journals/7_1/10.pdf

- Edegoh, L. O. N., Asemah, E. S., & Ekanem, I. B. (2013). Facebook and Relationship Management among Students of Anambra State University, Uli, Nigeria. *International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(1), 205-216. Retrieved on 04/06/2015 from
- Facebook (n.d). Facebook Newsroom. Retrieved on 07/06/2015 from <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info>
- Fatile, J. O. & Adejuwon, K. D. (2011). Conflict and Conflict Management in Tertiary Institutions: The Case of Nigerian Universities. *European Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 7(1), (Special Issue), 274 - 288. Retrieved on 02/06/2015 from http://www.journalsbank.com/ejhss_7_3.pdf
- Mansfield, H. (2010). Social media for social good: A how-to guide for nonprofits. New York: McGraw-Hill. Quoted in Rios-Aguilar, C. (2012). Getting Connected: Harnessing the Power of Social Media to Enhance Community College Student Success. *The Claremont Letter*, 6(3), 1 – 5. Retrieved on 02/06/2015 from <http://cgu.edu/PDFFiles/ses/Claremont%20Letter/Letter%202012v6.3.pdf>
- Martin, G. L., & Seifert, T. A. (2011). The relationship between students' interactions with student affairs professionals and cognitive outcomes in the first year of college. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 48(4), 389–410. Retrieved on 03/06/2015 from https://www.wesleyan.edu/reslife/faculty-academic-partners/The_Relationship.pdf
- Omemu, F., & Oladunjoye, P. (2013). Strategies for Managing Conflict in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Foundations and Management*, 1(2), 177-189. Retrieved on 02/06/2015 from http://www.ijefm.com/IJEFM%20Vol.,%201_2_Fekix%20&%20Patrick.pdf
- Owusu, G. A., Tawiah, M. A., Sena-Kpeglo, C. & Onyame, J. T. (2014). Orientation Impact on Performance of Undergraduate Students in University of Cape Coast (Ghana). *International Journal of Educational Administration and Policy Studies*, 6(7), 131 – 140. Retrieved on 06/06/2015 from http://www.academicjournals.org/article/article1409140647_Owusu%20et%20al.pdf

- Richardson, S. & Radloff, A. (2014). Allies in learning: critical insights into the importance of staff–student interactions in university education. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 19(6), 603 – 615. Retrieved on 06/06/2015 from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13562517.2014.901960#.VXMOWLBFAcA>
- Scagnoli, N. (n.d). Strategies for Designing an Orientation for Online Students. Retrieved on 06/06/2015 from <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/2330/Strategies4orient.pdf?sequence=2>
- Scagnoli, N. (n.d). Strategies for Designing an Orientation for Online Students, Citing Robinson, D., Burns, C., & Gaw, K. (1996). Orientation Programs: A Foundation for Students Learning and Success. *New Directions for Students Services*, 75, 55 – 68. Retrieved on 06/06/2015 from <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/2330/Strategies4orient.pdf?sequence=2>
- Selwyn, N. (2012). Social Media in Higher Education. *The Europa World of Learning*. Retrieved on 05/06/2015 from <http://www.educationarena.com/pdf/sample/sample-essay-selwyn.pdf>
- Smith, S. D. & Caruso, J. B. (2010). ECAR study of undergraduate students and information technology. Retrieved on 08/06/2015 from <http://www.educause.edu/Resources/ECARStudyofUndergraduateStudent/217333>
- University of Florida (n.d). what is new student orientation? Retrieved on 06/06/2015 from <http://legacy.usfsm.edu/students/orientation/what%20is%20new%20student%20orientation%20document%20for%20website.pdf?from=404>
- Wozniak, H., Pizzica, J., & Mahony, M. J. (2012). Design-based research principles for student orientation to online study: Capturing the lessons learnt. *Australian Journal of Education Technology*, 28(5), 896 – 991. Retrieved on 06/06/2015 from <http://ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet28/wozniak.pdf>