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## Measuring Aspiring Professionalism Quotient among University of Ilorin Public Relations Students

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### Abstract

The study examines the aspiring quotient professionalism among students who specialise in public relations at the University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria during the 2016/2017 academic session. Method of the study is survey conducted on all the 42 out of the 44 students that constitute the study population. Findings show that most respondents regularly do every task they are assigned to the best of their ability, treat people with respect and often do what is morally and ethically right. The study concludes that students studying public relations generally possess the basic credentials required for professionalism. This is in spite of the few that lack the qualities required of a potential public relations practitioner evidenced in their lack of interest to become public relations practitioners after their training. Based on findings, the study recommends, among others, that those with positive disposition to work, and are courteous as well as relentless in keeping abreast with current trends in public relations should sustain the culture, and that those who rarely do assigned tasks or fail to do what is right from a moral and ethical perspective should eschew from such conduct as such misdemeanours have no place in public relations practice.

**Key words:** Professionalism, quotient, public relations, University, students

### Introduction

Interest in public relations research manifests in several academic studies that exist in the discipline. However, these studies ignore the aspect of measuring aspiring professionalism quotient particularly of University students with a bias in public relations. There is also lack of studies on what motivates students to specialise in public relations. Owolabi (2009) conducts a survey with the objective of investigating the effect of public relations professionalism and ethics in a depressed economy with reference to Nigeria. In a related study Nayan, Samsudin, Othman and

Tiung(2012) have discussed the current competencies practiced by public relations practitioners in selected countries in Europe and Asia. The objective is to identify best competences in order to provide guidelines for developing a professional competencies model that is consistent with the culture and environment of public relations practitioners. On their part, Keghku and Momoh (2016) have conducted an ambitious study on application of new media in public relations practice in selected tertiary institutions in Kogi State. Gupta (2006) has also carried out a research with a view to measuring the

extent of professionalism in public relations in India and how much consensus, if any exists, regarding professional standards among public relations professionals working in agencies and those working with corporate organisations.

According to de Bussy and Wolf (2009), research on the profession of public relations has shown increasing numbers around the world and, in most of the studies, the issue of professionalism is a key area of focus. This motivates the need to complement existing studies by making inroads into evaluating aspiring professionalism quotient of potential public relations practitioners undergoing training. Thus, the quest for students in institutions of higher learning to become professionals in public relations appears to be one of the motivational factors students opt for their dream course. Therefore, students nursing the ambition of becoming public relations practitioners usually enroll in Mass Communication and specifically public relations depending on the nature of the programme as designed by different institutions.

In the course of their studies, students are exposed to a wide range of public relations-related issues both in theory and practice. This is done preparatory not only for examinations purposes but to enhance their chances of effectively discharging their duties when they finally become public relations practitioners. It is in this regard that the regulatory body of the profession in Nigeria, the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, (NIPR) plays a vital role. To further sharpen the skills and capability of students, the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations ensures through the programme accreditation, that institutions offering the course meet minimum standards. This probably

inclined Okafor (2002), who argues that the quest to offer public relations as a course of study and the need for professionalism in the discipline led to a situation where the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, was established primarily to emphasise on the need for proper education and sound academic background for practitioners of public relations in Nigeria. To further stretch the need in ensuring professionalism, NIPR makes provision for students to register as student-members while still on training. This enables them to leverage on this offering to be inducted along with other aspiring members who might have undergone the due process to become full-fledged members.

Given that public relations practitioners acquire requisite knowledge, skills, and are recognized by the NIPR, they are expected to exhibit high level professionalism in the discharge of their duties. On account of this, Okafor (2002) remarks that the need for some higher institutions in the country including the University of Ilorin, Nigeria, offering public relations, facilitate the ability and skills of potential practitioners. So far, a perusal on literature shows that, while numerous academic studies have been undertaken about students in relation to public relations professionalism, the absence of studies on aspiring professionalism quotient of students as well as the lack of motivational factors responsible for students' interest in public relations as a discipline suggest the existence of academic research lacuna in studies on public relations research.

### Statement of the Problem

Abundant literature exists on the study of public relations. However, these studies neglect the aspect of assessment of

professionalism quotient of both potential and practicing members in the profession. Similarly, researchers have not explored the aspect of what motivates students to study public relations. A look at the literature reveals that much as the existing studies dwell on professionalism generally (Boynton, 2006; & Panina & Bierman, 2013); some specifically deal with the effect of professionalism (Owolabi, 2009); measuring the extent of public relations professionalism (Gupta, 2006), and competencies of public relations practitioners (Nayan, Samsudin, Othman & Tiung, 2012). It is against the backdrop of the existing research gap occasioned by non-availability of studies with a bearing on professionalism quotient, and the rationale for students' decision to study public relations that this study was undertaken.

### Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study are:

- i. To identify the students that are likely to become public relations practitioners after their studies.
- ii. To determine aspiring professionalism quotient of public relations students.

### Theoretical Framework

The study made use of Role theory which examines the linkages between an organization and performances that practitioners give or are expected to give while engaged in interaction with others. Role theory concerns one of the most important characteristics of social behaviour which is that, human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and the situation. It deals with settled ways of engagement expected from holders of certain positions (Keller, 1997). According

to Sesen (2015) social philosopher George Herbert Mead (1934), anthropologist Ralph Linton (1936; 1947), a psychologist Jacob Moreno (1934) are considered as the founders of role theory, independently from each other.

Researchers argue that an approach within the role theory is the structural approach which entails that role represents the dynamic aspect of one's status. When one puts into effect the rights and duties which constitute his or her status, he or she performs a role. Michener and Delamater (1999) corroborate that people behave in a predictable way, and that an individual's behaviour is context specific, based on social position and other factors. One valid argument about role is that a role is a characteristic behaviour or expected behaviour, a part to be played, or a script for social conduct (Coser, 1975 cited in Sese, 2015).

The justification of using role theory is that, it is a major link in understanding individual behaviour and social structure. It is helpful in delineating the minimum of attitudes and behaviour which an individual, in this context, a potential public relations practitioner must assume if he or she is to participate in the manifest expression of pattern. After all, an organization which the public relations practitioner represents has some basic expectations such as continuity, financial strength, increasing sales, gaining prestige, finding employees, and so on. Similarly, there are various expectations of society from the organization. At the centre of both the organisation and its numerous publics in society is the public relations practitioner whose role is essentially to establish and maintain regular communication between an organisation and the society with a view to achieving mutual benefits.

### Profession and Professionalism

Despite different perspectives by researchers and scholars to differentiate a profession from professionalism, it appears the two terms are often construed and used interchangeably. In the same vein, the concept of profession is much disputed (Sciulli, 2005). The Merriam-Webster dictionary defined professionalism as the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person; and it defines a profession as a calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive academic preparation.

For most researchers, professions are regarded as essentially the knowledge-based category of service occupations which usually follow a period of tertiary education and vocational training and experience. For instance, Idid and Arandas (2016) defined a profession as one kind of occupation, which has high standards and special requirements. In attempt to identify these requirements, Sha (2011) declared that among the characteristics of a profession in public relations include: standardized education based on a theoretical body of knowledge, subscribing to codes of ethics, belonging to professional associations, be recognized and acknowledged by the public through accountability, certification or accreditation. A different way of categorizing professions is to see them as the structural, occupational and institutional arrangements for work associated with the uncertainties of modern lives in risk societies.

Professionalism, according to Evans (2008) is a:

Professionally-influenced practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession's purpose and status and the

specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and expertise prevalent within, the profession, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice (p.13).

Boyt, Lusch and Naylor's (2001) emphasised on the definition that professionalism, for example, is on the influential capacity of the professional her or himself. According to them, professionalism consists of the attitudes and behaviour one possesses toward one's profession. Boyt, Lusch and Naylor's (2001) further explained that it is an attitudinal and behavioral orientation that individuals possess toward their occupations. Professionalism empowers public relations managers to negotiate with clients to change organizational behaviour, to consider the interests of publics as well as their own interests (Grunig, 2000). Therefore, professionalism in occupations and professions implies the importance of trust. Professionalism requires professionals to be worthy of that trust, to put clients first, to maintain confidentiality and not use their knowledge for fraudulent purposes (Evetts, 2012).

These definitions contrast the general conception of professionalism, which is something characteristic only of members of a profession. Probably, this is why David Maister cited in Parsons (2008) suggests that:

Professionalism is predominantly an attitude, not a set of competences...real professionalism has little, if anything to do with which business you are in, what role within that business you perform, or how many degrees you have. Rather it implies pride in work, a commitment to quality, a dedication to the interests of the client, and a sincere desire to help (p.10).

Viewed this way, professionalism implies acquisition and exhibition of

definite characteristics. This contrasts conceptions people equate it with a profession commonly considered as master of a particular intellectual skill through education and training, acceptance of duties to a broader society than merely one's clients, employees, objectivity, high standards of conduct and programme. So, we might conclude, it is the quality of professionalism that sets individuals apart from other peers even if they do not work in disciplines with high levels of education and training and codes of professional standards.

Premised on this, it is necessary for a clear need for professionalism education for aspiring public relations practitioners to gauge their quotient with a view to improving on their education. This is one key way to ensure that at the appropriate time to make important judgment or decision; their background experience will allow them to make a decision that will at least be morally and professionally defensible, even if not everyone agrees with them.

### **Public Relations**

While there could be a clear understanding of the field of public relations, Seitel (2007) argued that a generally accepted definition of public relations still eludes practitioners and researchers. This is due to different background and orientation of the researchers, some of who are either in Marketing or Business Management. In view of this, the researchers of this study rely on Cutlip, Center and Broom's (2009) conception of public relations which states that public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends. This definition underscores the essence of

public relations practitioners that they manage communication between management and publics to build relationships with the publics that are most likely to affect the behaviour of the organization or who are most affected by the behaviour of the organization (Grunig, 2006). Typical functions of the practitioner depends on competencies which he exhibits as being a trusted counsel (advise and anticipate), management of internal communication (engage employees), media relations (develop public trust), sustained community relations (establish public support) as well as external communication (build public support and trust).

### **Empirical Studies on Public Relations and Professionalism**

Studies on public relations and professionalism have always been the focus of communication and behavioural sciences. Researchers and practitioners have argued about ways to enhance the professionalism and prestige of public relations (Sha, 2011). Many scholars are also of the view that professionalism empowers public relations managers to negotiate with clients to change organizational behaviour, to consider the interests of publics as well as their own interests (Grunig, 2000). The general consensus appears to be that Public Relations must achieve professional status to gain acceptance of its social role as valuable to the society. Premised on this, the study dwells on the literature focusing on public relations and professionalism.

Idid and Arandas (2016) carried out study titled: Professional values, ethics and professionalism of public relations practitioners. The aim was to explore the influence of education, length of service

professionalism, and ethics on the professional values of public relations practitioners in Malaysia. A total of 427 copies of questionnaire were distributed to public relations practitioners in Malaysia, and 322 copies were returned. The study included 61% female respondents, and 39% male respondents. The study analyzed and identified the influence of professionalism and ethics on professional values of public relations practitioners. Additionally, the study examined whether education and experience influence professional values through professionalism, and code of ethics. Six hypotheses were tested to answer the research questions. The results from this study fully supported the hypotheses indicating that professionalism and ethics had an influence on professional values of public relations practitioners. The results also showed that education influenced both professionalism and ethics, and length of service influenced both professionalism and ethical practice.

Lading Hum & Stephen (1998) conducted a study titled: Relationship management in public relation: Dimensions of an organization-public relationship. The objective was to identify through qualitative research and verify through quantitative research relationship dimensions upon which good organization-public relationships are initiated, developed and maintained. The respondents for this study were local telephone subscribers who resided in territories that were recently opened to competition for local telephone service. A total of 384 respondents were surveyed. It developed three hypotheses. Overall, the result of the research suggests a significant role for public relations within the broader scope of corporate strategic planning.

In a study by Sriramesh, (1999) titled: The model of Public Relations in India, which objective was to use Grunig's models of public relations to explore the nature of public relations in a sample of four types of organizations in India. The study began with the purpose of identifying the nature of public relations practice in India based on a theoretical framework. A sample of 18 organizations was studied for this analysis. This sample consisted of nine private corporations, seven public sector enterprises, a government agency and a non-profit organization. This study used a combination of survey research and ethnographic analysis. The findings of this study indicate that, regardless of the size or type of ownership of the organization, most of the public relations professionals practiced, apart from Grunig's model, what can be called the personal influence model in representing the interests of their organizations.

Hogg (1999) carried out a study titled: Practitioner Roles in Public Relations. The objective was to consider the various roles that public relations practitioners play and the implications of those roles for the status of public relations within the organisation. The study was situated within the context of local authorities in Scotland. The purpose of this research was to investigate role prescriptions and their associated behaviours by exploring practitioner and client perceptions of the roles played by public relations practitioners in local government. In particular the research addresses whether higher level management perceives the same role for the public relations practitioner as the practitioner does. In order to complete the research, a two stage methodology was adopted. In the first instance data were collected using in-depth interviews with focus groups,

which was distributed to all local authorities in Scotland. In the second stage, a random questionnaire was sent to the person responsible for public relations. The results indicate that chief executives and politicians have very definite perceptions of public relations and expectations of practitioners and that even practitioners themselves have a limited view of the role that public relations can play in decision making within local authorities. This implies that they are not, nor likely to be, part of the dominant coalition, with consequent implications for the development of excellence in public relations. This study is the empirical manifestation of a new direction in public relations roles research, one which takes a wider look at the organisational and intrapersonal factors which directly influence day-to-day public relations practice. Exposing and exploring the complexity of role episodes, this type of research yields a grounded basis for achieving a positive change in the nature of organisational roles enacted by practitioners in the future.

In a study by Mykkänen, and Vos (2015) Titled: The contribution of public relations to organizational decision making: Insights from the literature, which purpose was to clarify the contribution of public relations practitioners to organizational decision making and, in particular, how this has been seen in peer-reviewed journals over the last 10 years. After a literature search, 38 articles originating from 26 different journals were further analyzed using thematic analysis. The period investigated ranged from the start of 2002 to October 2012. In the general literature on the roles of public relations practitioners, their participation in decision-making was most frequently discussed in relation to

its impact on decision-making and enhancing managers' understanding of the communicative aspects of decision-making processes. In the specialist literature on corporate social responsibility, the giving of strategic advice, along with ethics, crises and public affairs, was also often addressed. It seems that since for over the years, the roles of public relations practitioners in facilitating decision-making processes and in communicating decisions have received more detailed attention. This study offers a comprehensive picture of the different ways in which public relations practitioners contribute to organizational decision-making processes, showing different combinations of the roles of participator in decision-making, and advisor, facilitator and disseminator of organizational decisions. The identification and description of the roles will help practitioners to reflect on their own roles in organizational decision-making.

### Method

The study adopted the survey method. Population of the study was all the 44 undergraduates and postgraduate students specializing in public relations at the Mass Communication Department, University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria during the 2016/2017 academic session. Sample of study was based total enumeration. That means all the students that constituted the population considering their small size as posited in Glenn (1992) that if a population is small, the entire population can constitute the sample size so as to achieve a desirable level of precision. Instrument of data collection was structured questionnaire; copies of which were administered and retrieved in a day.

### Data Analysis and Presentation

The data presentation is based on 42 students out of the 44 students, who were respondents representing 95 per cent retrieval rate. This was due to the fact that two of the students were absent at the time of questionnaire administration. In terms of their demographic variables the respondents, 23 (55%) were female while 19 (45%) were male. On programme status, 15 (36%) were postgraduates and 27 (64%) were undergraduates.

**RQ1:** What is the magnitude of students who wish to become public relations practitioners after their studies?

Two items were used to answer this research question. The first question sought to establish the magnitude of students desirous of becoming public relations practitioners after their training. Data show that most of the respondents i.e. 27 (64%) strongly agree to become practitioners. This to a large extent demonstrate their decision to study public relations was not by accident in the first instance.

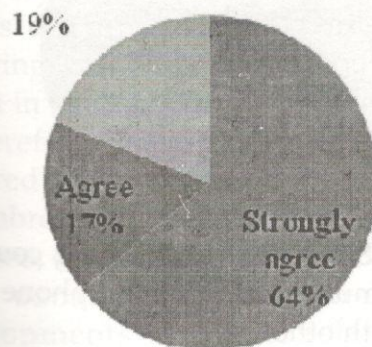


Figure 1: Willingness to become a PR practitioner

When respondents were required to indicate what motivated them to opt for public relations as a discipline, almost half of them i.e. 19 (45%) attributed to influence of some outstanding public relations practitioners followed by the personal desire of other respondents.

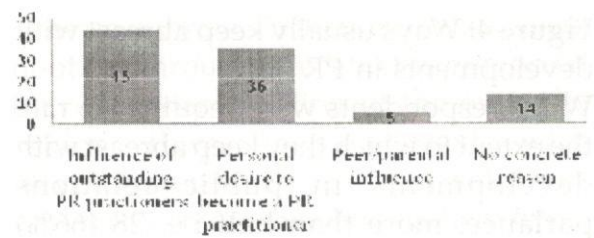


Figure 2: Main motivation to become a PR practitioner

**RQ2:** What is the aspiring professionalism quotient of public relations students?

One way of determining the aspiring professionalism quotient of respondents was for them to indicate if they always did what they knew to be right from a moral and ethical perspective. Based on data, most of them i.e. 31 (73%) answered in the affirmative. By virtue of their response, most of the respondents do not already have the mindset but are exhibiting some of the requisite qualities expected of a public relations practitioner.

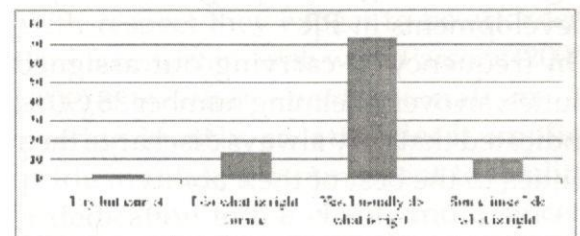


Figure 3: Decision on doing what is right

The data on figure 4 show that 17(41%) respondents usually keep up-to-date of developments in public relations by reading a lot of literature on public relations. This is followed by 14 (33%) respondents, who indicated that they usually engage other people in informal discussions on issues pertaining to public relations practice. This demonstrates to a large extent the zeal respondents are conditioning themselves as aspiring practitioners to be able to effectively discharge their responsibilities if they finally become practitioners.

**Figure 4: Ways usually keep abreast with developments in PR**

When respondents were required to rate the extent to which they keep abreast with developments in public relations parlance, more than half i.e. 28 (66%) indicated high, 10 (24%) indicated average while 4 (10%) indicated low. The largest population that indicates high shows the unwavering interest respondents have in their chosen field of study.

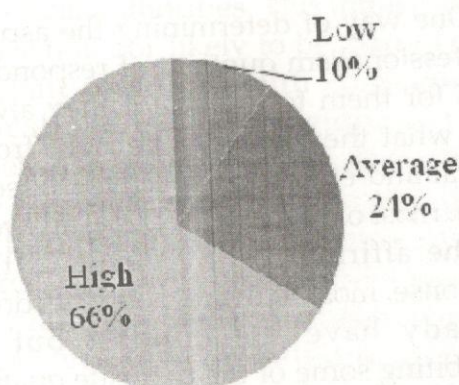


**Figure 5: Rating of keeping abreast with developments in PR**

On frequency of carrying out assigned duties, an overwhelming number 38 (90%) indicated that they always discharge their duties to the best of their ability.

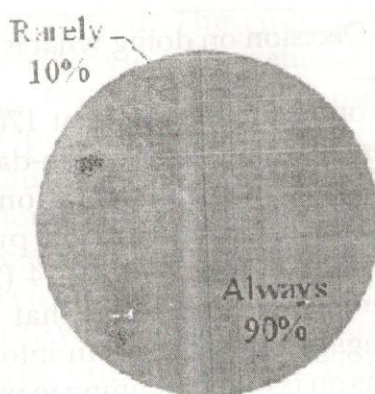


**Figure 6: Frequency of doing assigned tasks**

The data on table 7 show that almost all respondents i.e. 39 (93%) agree that they always treat people they work with including superiors and other people they

manage with respect they expect to be afforded.

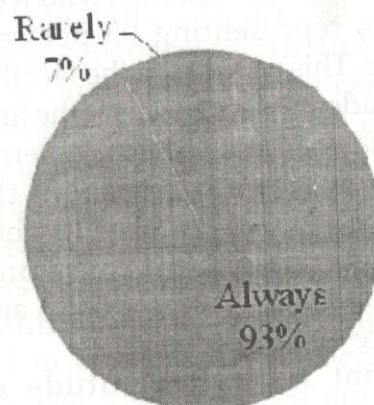


**Figure 7: Frequency of treating people with respect**

When respondents were required to indicate how frequent they were courteous in communication with other people even on phone and e-mail, majority of them i.e. 34 (81%) admitted that they are always courteous in their communication with others.

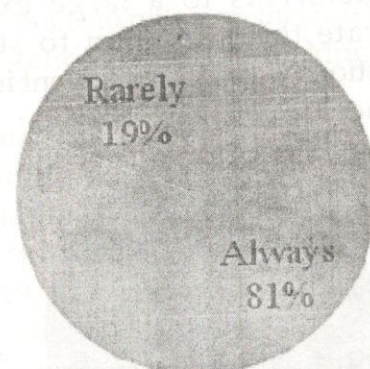


**Figure 8: Frequency of being courteous in communication even on phone and e-mail with others**

**Discussion of Findings**

The findings of the study demonstrate that most of the respondents (64%) strongly agree to become practitioners. Another interesting finding is concerned with the motivation to specialise in public relations. The analysis shows that almost half of the respondents (45%) attributed the driving force to specialise in public relations to influence of some

outstanding public relations practitioners followed by 35% respondents, who link their motivation to their inborn desire to become public relations practitioner hence, the decision to study public relations as a course. After all, researchers and practitioners have argued about ways to enhance the professionalism and prestige of public relations (Sha, 2011). One of the ways is to undergo a thorough training in the discipline. And this could be why the respondents enroll for the course to sharpen their skills and knowledge preparatory for their desire to become practitioners.

Perhaps most salient as a professional norm of public relations is the ability and willingness to always do what is considered right from a moral and ethical perspective. Based on data, most of the respondents (73%) answered in the affirmative that they always do what is morally and ethically right. This presupposes that public relations practitioners should aspire to always do what they know to be right. This culture begins during training. One way of achieving this is knowledge about current trends in the field of public relations. It is, therefore, not surprising that when required to indicate how they usually keep abreast of developments in public relations, 41% respondents indicates that they usually keep up-to-date of developments in public relations by reading a lot of literature on public relations. This is followed by 33% respondents, who indicated that they usually engage other people in informal discussions on issues pertaining to public relations practice. The results affirm Idid and Arandas' (2016) findings which also show that education influence both professionalism and ethics, and length of service influence both professionalism and ethical practice. The respondents'

quest to improve on their professionalism quotient through education is reinforced by respondents' rating of the extent to which they keep abreast with developments in public relations parlance as more than half of them (66%) indicate 'high.' On the contrary, 24% and 10% respondents indicate 'average' and 'low' respectively. The few respondents whose responses indicate nonchalance in keeping abreast with trendy issues in public relations is expected because some of them claimed not to become public relations practitioners after training and likelihood is for them to constitute this percentage of respondents.

Just as the study reveals that an overwhelming number of respondents (90%) always carry out assigned duties to the best of their ability, almost all respondents (93%) agree that they always treat people they work with including superiors and other people they manage with respect they expect to be afforded. This is consistent with what Parsons (2008) suggests that professionalism is predominantly an attitude; it implies pride in work, a commitment to quality, a dedication to the client, and a sincere desire to do what is right. To crown it all, when respondents were required to indicate how frequent they are courteous in communication with other people even on phone and e-mail, majority of them (81%) admitted that they are always courteous in their communication with others. This further affirms Mykkänen, and Vos' (2015) assertion that identification and description of roles help practitioners to reflect on their own roles in organizational decision-making to be able to conduct themselves responsibly.

Largely, by virtue of data harvested, the potential public relations practitioner show high quotient for professionalism.

This is a clear indication of an aptitude to effectively function as a public relations practitioner if subsequently engaged as one.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The study focused on some key attributes of professionalism in public relations. These are courtesy, treatments of other people, willingness to discharge responsibilities. Having explored the essence and quest for professionalism among potential in public relations practitioners, the study concludes that the aspiring quotient of the students is high. The implication is the likelihood of the public relations aspirants to exhibit high level professionalism when they transit from training to actual practitioners.

Based on the strength of the study findings, it is recommended that the potential practitioners should not renege from the positive key indicators which are attributes of professionalism. In addition, few respondents, who in the first instance are not inclined to become public relations practitioners with low professionalism quotient should have a rethink about their conduct and adjust as they may finally find themselves in the public relations profession that requires high level professionalism.

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