



**ASSOCIATION OF
COMMUNICATION SCHOLARS
& PROFESSIONALS OF NIGERIA
BOOK SERIES**

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To cite this article:

Oludare Ebenezer Ogunyombo (2025), Public Relations Education in the Digital Era: Towards a Tripartite Learning Model for Nigeria in Digital Communication and Governance in Africa: Reimagining AI in Communication and Governance ACSPN Book Series 10, pp. 229— 250
Retrieved from <http://www.acspn.com.ng>

(Institutional or Subscribed access may be required)

Please note that this is an electronic, pre-print version of this article published by the Evan Brothers (Nigeria Publishers) Limited for Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN).

The ACSPN Book Series is exclusive to the Association of Communication Scholars & Professionals of Nigeria.

ISBN: 978-978-690-135-0

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Layout/Design: Ashroph De Grafico Ventures.

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CHAPTER 12

Public Relations Education in the Digital Era: Towards a Tripartite Learning Model for Nigeria

Oludare Ebenezer OGUNYOMBO

Public relations is an aggregate of activities designed to manage the truth within a particular context to establish, maintain and sustain mutual understanding among stakeholders to which the situation is relevant. Public relations is a strategic process that systematically identifies, analyses and distils issues and trends which are likely to influence the reputation of a brand, an organisation or an individual among its stakeholders. In essence, public relations is about managing

people, processes and products to grow reputation and establish cordial relationships.

It is important to recognize that the practice of public relations in Nigeria cannot be reduced to simply adopting the global evolution of modern public relations, as often portrayed in textbooks like Baran (2013). When referring to the global south, this paper specifically addresses regions traditionally considered outside the Western world, such as parts of Europe and America. However, it is essential to understand that every society, regardless of its geographical location, has its own history of public relations, which has shaped how people have interacted over time. While advanced technology has undeniably influenced the practice of public relations, the unique cultural and indigenous factors within individual societies have also played a significant role in its development and cannot be overlooked.

In the Yoruba culture of Nigeria, palace chiefs traditionally serve as public relations consultants to the king, advising on state matters. These chiefs take on the role of researchers, tasked with identifying issues affecting the people and understanding their expectations. They employ various research methods, including interviews and focus group discussions, often conducted at the village square to gauge public opinion. Additionally, they use observation, either as participants or non-participants, to collect insights that inform the king's decisions, fostering mutual understanding between the ruler and his subjects. The chiefs also engage in social listening through indirect channels. They rely on wives, children, and workers, who share daily updates based on their interactions at the market, playground, or workplace. These informal sources often serve as secondary data for the chiefs when they are unable to personally gather information directly from the people. This approach is an example of how indigenous practices have historically influenced the practice of public relations within the community.

Interestingly, the public relations skills demonstrated by the chiefs and the king are passed down through generations, learned from their ancestors. As part of their training, younger chiefs are often taken to meetings or on trips where they observe and listen to their parents or other elders. This immersive experience helps them develop the skills and competencies needed for their roles. This practice highlights the significance of pedagogy in public relations, emphasizing how indigenous knowledge and practices are not only essential to the community but also offer valuable insights to the broader world.

While the previous discussion highlights a nearly seamless pathway for learning and practicing public relations, the reality is not always the same. In contemporary societies, there is often a struggle to build, maintain, and sustain the mutual relationships necessary for fostering understanding and harmony. Businesses, governments, and other institutions continually seek a middle ground in their relationships with various stakeholders, aiming to remain relevant while achieving their goals. However, many organizations turn to public relations professionals for guidance in bridging these gaps.

Unfortunately, there have been consistent complaints about the preparedness of PR professionals to effectively engage when they are tasked with handling real-world challenges. This issue has been linked to the current approaches to training young professionals, particularly at the university level. Unlike traditional, localised public relations practices, which were often limited in scope, modern-day public relations requires a broader, more global perspective to be effective. As a result, the goal of this paper is to explore some of the challenges within public relations education and propose solutions to enhance the pedagogical approach, ensuring that future PR professionals are better prepared for the complexities of the industry.

Issues in Public Relations Education

Public relations in Nigeria, like in many other parts of the world, has experienced significant growth. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence and predictive communication algorithms, public relations education must evolve to ensure Nigerian graduates remain competitive both locally and globally. For Nigeria to cultivate a creative industry capable of competing internationally, PR graduates must be adequately trained to meet these emerging challenges.

As Ashiekpe (2019) highlights, there are two primary perspectives on public relations education. One view suggests that the goal is to foster a passion for learning and develop the capacity to serve organizations and societies according to established norms and principles. The other perspective focuses on equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary for persuasion, emphasizing the practical aspects of the profession. These differing views underscore the need for a balanced approach to PR education that prepares graduates for both theoretical and practical challenges in a rapidly evolving industry.

The issues highlighted in the ongoing debate about public relations education are reflected in the varying perspectives on the standard of PR education in Nigeria. Public relations education, typically housed within mass communication departments in many Nigerian tertiary institutions, has faced criticism from both the industry and academia. Emelike (2020) noted that "The concern for many is the fact that the quality of mass communication graduates produced each year by tertiary institutions has not been commendable in recent times. Employers, particularly media business owners, are often forced to retrain fresh graduates before assigning them roles. In some cases, graduates from other disciplines, who are perceived as sharp or passionate about media jobs, are hired and tend to perform better than mass communication graduates."

Odunlami (2014) foresaw this challenge, stating that "the concern of journalism and mass communication educators remains how to ensure an effective blend of journalism curriculum with the constantly changing needs of the media industry." Similarly, scholars like Aliyu (2018) emphasized that "the responsibility of bridging this gap lies with mass communication and journalism educators." It's important to note that this challenge is not unique to Nigeria, as similar concerns about the quality of PR education are prevalent globally.

A 2023 study by the Commission on Public Relations Education sheds light on global trends in PR education, offering valuable insights for advancing public relations education across societies. The report defines public relations as a strategic function focused on building and maintaining relationships, with undergraduate programmes aimed at preparing future practitioners. It also highlights that the curriculum often follows the five-course standard recommended in the Commission's 2006 report, *The Professional Bond*. Graduate programmes, in turn, place a strong emphasis on advanced theory and strategic thinking.

However, the study reveals that cultural distinctions are often embedded within programmes, and several barriers hinder the development of an "ideal" public relations programme. These include issues related to resources, government policies, cultural context, programme structure, and insufficient connections with industry professionals. Scholars and practitioners worldwide have explored these dynamics to understand what works and what doesn't in various societies, investigating the factors that contribute to effective PR education and those that impede its growth (Commission on Public Relations Education, 2023).

Gonçalves, Spínola, and Padamo (2013) investigated how closely public relations education in Portugal aligns with international standards. Their study revealed that PR education in the country

receives relatively little attention compared to other disciplines. This finding is consistent with an earlier study by Gonçalves (2009), which explored the views of professionals on PR education in Portugal. The research found that most PR graduate programmes in Portugal are integrated into communication sciences programmes, which also cover subjects like journalism and advertising. The curriculum is broadly divided into three main areas: communication sciences, interdisciplinary studies, and specialization (in PR, advertising, or journalism). The study also highlighted that much of the content related to PR in preparatory courses, which are often mandatory, is fragmented across these different subject areas. As a result, the significance of PR within the overall communication sciences curriculum—whether theoretical or practical—is diminished. Both practitioners and educators participating in the study supported the view that PR studies do not hold a particularly prominent role within the curriculum.

Ogunyombo (2018) examined editors' assessments of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of journalism trainees in Nigerian newspaper organizations, many of whom had been exposed to public relations (PR) courses at various levels. The study found that editors rated the trainees' performance as average in terms of the knowledge and skills required for the job. However, when it came to the trainees' overall disposition and personal qualities, more than 60% of the editors felt that the trainees performed above average, showing a strong eagerness to learn. In a different study, Azionya, Oksiutycz, and Benecke (2019) explored the effectiveness of a Value-Based Education (VBE) approach in equipping PR students with the ethical values needed for the profession. The study found that VBE helped students develop an ethical conscience that was attuned to diversity and poly-contextuality. After participating in the experiment, students reported that the VBE approach enabled them to think more strategically about public relations strategies that could address

complex, real-world issues. The study concluded that learning opportunities grounded in societal challenges encourage students to reassess their biases, beliefs, and, most importantly, their values, fostering a greater consideration in for others. By confronting the realities of others, students are compelled to use their professional skills to develop solutions that are sensitive to diverse perspectives.

Creedon and Al-Khaja (2019) examined public relations practice, education, and research in the Middle East and highlighted the necessity of shifting the discipline's scholarship from global isolation to cultural inclusivity. Upon reviewing the current scholarship in PR, they observed an overwhelming dominance of "Western" theories. They emphasized the need for research that fosters culturally collaborative studies of media, culture, technology, and society in order to provide more diverse global perspectives. The study proposed five strategies to help PR achieve global inclusivity.

The first strategy focuses on enhancing research collaboration by promoting studies that explore the intersection of media, culture, technology, and society from a cross-cultural standpoint. The second strategy addresses the importance of multilingual education, recognizing that different traditions and approaches, including translation choices, must be incorporated into PR theory. The third strategy involves aligning research more closely with the PR profession. Given that cultural differences often hinder the applicability of quantitative analysis, they stressed the importance of qualitative research in enriching PR studies globally. The fourth strategy advocates for evaluating the globalization of curricula, urging instructors to incorporate more cultural content into their courses and recommending the creation of textbooks that reflect the global scope of the field. The final strategy calls for the establishment of international accreditation standards. These standards should involve bilingual

accreditation teams and employ a model that reflects multilingual, global, and contemporary practices within the PR profession.

Ferreira (2022) explored the pedagogy of public relations by reviewing the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) model for PR education, specifically as a proposal for South Africa. The Wheel of Education, introduced by IPRA, aims to promote widely recognized educational standards. This model includes a recommended curriculum and a set of general guidelines for research and instruction. While the model holds international relevance, the study found that it lacks sufficient focus on international public relations. Ferreira suggested that the model should be adapted to address the unique developmental needs of South Africa, rather than serving as a one-size-fits-all approach for PR education in the country. Polat (2023) examined the trends in the digitalization of public relations education through a content analysis of PR curricula. The study reviewed the curricula of several universities and found that most digitalization courses in public relations programmes were theoretical and offered as electives. This indicates a need for PR education to incorporate a stronger emphasis on digitalization. These studies underscore the increasing global focus on improving public relations education, highlighting efforts to adapt curricula and teaching practices to meet evolving industry demands.

Trends Shaping Public Relations Education

The issues discussed in public relations education can be summarized for in-depth analysis, leading to recommendations for improvement. These issues can be seen as trends shaping public relations education both locally and globally. The Mexican Statement, a foundational definition of public relations, describes the field as an art and social science focused on monitoring trends. Monitoring these trends involves continuous inquiry into the profession and the factors influencing its evolution. A lack of

understanding or a superficial grasp of these factors has often contributed to complaints about the readiness of new mass communication graduates, particularly those in public relations, as they enter the workforce. To illustrate this industry challenge, Odunlami (2014) noted that the existing gap highlights the industry's awareness or lack thereof of the trends shaping communication.

One of the major trends shaping the public relations industry is the emphasis on storytelling and content creation. Achieving success today is nearly impossible without a clear content strategy that incorporates both product-focused content and targeted marketing plans. With billions of social media users, the key to standing out on these platforms is prioritizing digital PR and content creation. Effective content must include a mix of music, images, videos, infographics, and articles. Clients now expect PR professionals to create audio and video reports, carefully edited to tell a compelling story that resonates with the intended audience, rather than simply targeting a broad group.

Another important trend is the development of editorial skills. PR specialists must understand the media's house style when crafting press releases, as there is little room for "PR news" in the media landscape. If PR professionals fail to grasp these nuances, their press releases may be ignored. Newspaper editors often express frustration with the quality of materials submitted by PR consultants, citing the need to rewrite press releases, or, when pressed for time, abandoning the story altogether.

Citizen journalism and user-generated content are crucial elements that PR education must address. In addition to the impact of citizen journalism, modern technology also has a potentially transformative effect on PR practices in Nigeria. Citizen journalism refers to journalism conducted by non-professional journalists who use platforms like social media,

blogs, and websites to disseminate information. While there are still questions about whether citizen journalists can be as reliable as professionals with formal training, the rise of citizen journalism is undeniable and has gained global traction. In Nigeria, PR practices face similar challenges. With clients increasingly seeking daily updates from social listening to inform their decisions, PR practitioners are now required to monitor the digital landscape continuously.

The advancement of multimedia and communication technologies is another key factor influencing public relations education. Many communication tasks that once required highly specialized skills are now being performed by artificial intelligence. For instance, AI filters advertisements based on online behaviour, search engines curate stories according to individual interests, and social media platforms recommend influencers to users. Companies also employ social media listening technologies to track discussions on platforms like Twitter. These technological advancements enable PR professionals to work more efficiently by eliminating redundant tasks. In Nigeria, PR experts are quickly drafting press releases while attending events, editing them in real-time, sharing them with clients almost instantly, and sending them to the media within minutes much like journalists. With businesses increasingly demanding immediacy in their PR efforts, technology plays a crucial role in facilitating this need. As a result, courses focused on multimedia and communication technologies should be integral to the PR curriculum.

Another key factor influencing the evolution of PR education is the focus on PR measurement and evaluation. For a long time, inadequate measurement has been a challenge in public relations. However, this trend is now shifting. Thanks to advancements in technology, more PR professionals are becoming skilled in measurement techniques. As awareness of

the importance of measurement grows, public relations is increasingly recognized for its significant contributions to an organization's success. Consequently, organizational leaders, including government officials, now demand that PR professionals demonstrate how their activities contribute to company profitability. Most executives, including those in government agencies, feel a growing responsibility to ensure that funds allocated to PR initiatives are directly linked to measurable outcomes. As a result, emerging PR professionals must develop these measurement skills to thrive in the field. While the trends outlined are not exhaustive, they offer valuable insights into the need for improvements in PR education to better prepare the next generation of PR practitioners.

Cultural nuances and dynamics are increasingly influencing public relations education. As Creedon and Al-Khaja (2019) pointed out, PR education must now account for the unique characteristics of each society. These include factors such as language preferences, verbal and non-verbal communication cues, and dominant cultural practices that form the basis of an organization's connection with its target audience. PR students must be attuned to these elements as they learn, ensuring they are equipped to navigate and adapt to the cultural context in which they operate.

Theoretical Consideration

Since this paper aims to advance public relations pedagogy, a theoretical foundation is essential to guide the recommendations presented. One relevant framework is instructional theory, which provides specific strategies for facilitating learning and development. In the context of public relations education, the principles of instructional theory align with the objectives of this paper. This theory emphasizes structuring resources to enhance public education, particularly for young learners. A key milestone in the formalization of learning processes was *Bloom's Taxonomy*

of Educational Objectives, introduced in 1956 by Benjamin Bloom, a professor at the University of Chicago. This taxonomy significantly influenced the evolution of instructional theory in the United States during the 1970s. Another influential figure in this field was Robert M. Gagné, who contributed to instructional theory with his 1965 work *Conditions of Learning*, developed for Florida State University's Department of Educational Research.

Three core educational philosophies have shaped instructional theory. These include Constructivism, which emphasizes human activity as essential to knowledge construction; Behaviourism, which explains learning as a process of acquiring responses based on predetermined standards; and Cognitivism, which views learning as the formation of mental associations leading to knowledge acquisition. Instructional theory serves to create conditions that enhance learning outcomes. Its application is influenced by both the educational content and, more importantly, students' preferred learning methods. Educators and trainers use instructional theory as a framework to guide teaching practices and facilitate learning. It encompasses a range of models, techniques, and strategies designed to optimize the educational process.

A deeper exploration of instructional theory can be found in what is known as the universal methods of instruction, which are guided by five key principles. The first is the task-centered principle, which states that instruction should follow a structured sequence of progressively challenging, complete tasks. The second principle is the demonstration principle, which states that learning should involve guided skill demonstrations, encouraging peer discussion and practice. The third principle is the application principle in which instruction should provide constructive feedback and foster collaboration among peers. The activation principle, which is the fourth principle, states that lessons should build on students' prior knowledge, helping them

develop a structured framework for new information. The fifth principle, which is the integration principle, explains that students should engage in peer reviews and actively synthesize newly acquired knowledge. These principles collectively support effective instructional design, ensuring that learning is both structured and interactive.

The instructional theory of education may also be explained in terms of using situational methods. The situational methods can include role-play, synaptic, mastery learning, direct instruction, discussion, and conflict resolution. Peer learning, experiential learning, problem-based learning, and simulation-based learning are possible additional methods. These methods could lead to learning outcomes related to knowledge, understanding, application, assessment, synthesis, analysis, and affective development as well as integrated learning. Generally, the four main responsibilities of instructional theory are interaction management, knowledge sequence, knowledge selection, and interaction environment setting (Merrill & Jones, 1992; Reigeluth, 1999; Mayer, 1992; Bowden, 2008; Reigeluth, 2012).

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) Angle

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) was established in 1963, first as the Public Relations Association of Nigeria (PRAN). In June 1990, the Association attained the status of an Institute by Decree 16 (now an Act of the National Assembly) from which it derives the power and responsibility to register members, set parameters of knowledge to acquire to qualify to practice, regulate the practice and development of the PR profession as well monitor professional conducts through an established Code of Ethics, among others. The law stipulates standard academic and professional qualifications required for admission into the Institute (NIPR, 2024). The NIPR mandate put the Institute at the Centre of PR pedagogy in Nigeria. The Institute must identify, analyse and propose what should be the nature of

PR education in Nigeria. Since the Institute also deals with practice, which is what happens in the industry, it cannot afford to shy away from creating a path to addressing issues and trends aforementioned as influencing PR education vis-à-vis PR practice in Nigeria.

In examining the role of professional organizations in shaping pedagogy, Sparks and Conwell (1998) define a profession as “a disciplined group of individuals who possess special knowledge and skills in a widely recognized body of learning derived from formal education, research, and training. They are recognized by the public as such and apply this knowledge and exercise these skills in the interest of society.” A profession's educational standards are accredited by its professional association, ensuring that members adhere to ethical guidelines and demonstrate commitment to competence, integrity, altruism, and the advancement of public good within their field. As such, professional education is a fundamental pillar of any legitimate profession (Bivins, 1993; Hainsworth, 1993).

For the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) to fulfil its mandate of producing professionally relevant graduates, it must play a significant role in curriculum development beyond offering recommendations. However, Ashiekpe (2019) highlights a key challenge in public relations education in Nigeria the tendency to focus on the so-called theory-practice gap rather than emphasizing the integration of theory with practical application. He asserts that the objective should be to “transform curriculum intentions to curriculum realities” (p. 159). To bridge this gap and create a more effective learning framework, this paper proposes a *Tripartite Learning Model* for PR education.

A Tripartite Learning Model for PR Education in Nigeria

This paper proposes a *Tripartite Learning Model*, an institute-academia-industry framework designed to enhance the

effectiveness of public relations education. Rooted in the principles of instructional learning theory and systems theory, this model highlights the interconnected roles of its three key components. The first component of the ***Tripartite Learning Model*** is the *Institute*, represented in this context by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR). As a statutory body, the NIPR must uphold the core principle of instructional learning theory creating opportunities that increase the likelihood of effective learning. One of the primary ways to achieve this is through active participation in curriculum development for PR education. While NIPR played a role in the restructuring of mass communication education in Nigeria, which led to the approval of Public Relations as a standalone degree programme, further efforts are needed to ensure the programme's successful implementation. Beyond its involvement in policy changes, NIPR must take an active role in shaping the curriculum to foster a learning environment that bridges theory and practice effectively.

For example, NIPR can establish partnership agreements with professional bodies or associations in related fields, enabling PR students to gain hands-on exposure and practical experience while studying. Additionally, NIPR can facilitate collaborations between tertiary institutions offering PR education and these organizations to streamline implementation and ensure broader access to industry opportunities. A key benefit of this initiative is that it would provide PR students with a strong foundation of practical experience before entering the workforce. This, in turn, would minimize the need for extensive post-graduation training, allowing them to transition more seamlessly into professional roles.

One key organization for such partnerships is the Public Relations Consultants Association of Nigeria (PRCAN), the trade arm of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations. As the statutory

body overseeing registered PR firms in Nigeria, PRCAN could enter into formal agreements committing its member firms to offer internships, industrial attachments, and continuous training programmes. These opportunities would enable students to connect classroom learning with real-world PR practice. Another relevant organization is the National Institute of Marketing of Nigeria (NIMN), which comprises firms specializing in marketing and marketing communications, including advertising, public relations, experiential marketing, content creation, and consultancy. Since many of these companies represent potential employers for PR graduates, a strategic partnership between NIPR and NIMN could facilitate structured training opportunities within these organizations. This collaboration would ensure PR students gain valuable industry exposure, enhancing their employability and professional readiness.

Over time, public relations has evolved from a communication tool to both a management and leadership function. In Nigeria, two key professional bodies complement NIPR in overseeing management consultancy: the Nigerian Institute of Management (NIM) Chartered and the Chartered Institute of Personnel Management (CIPM). While NIM focuses on general management functions, CIPM specializes in people management, which aligns with internal communication management in public relations. To enhance PR education, NIPR can establish partnerships with these institutes, enabling their members to mentor PR students and provide practical exposure to management principles. By engaging with professionals in these fields, students can develop essential leadership and organizational skills that will support their growth and effectiveness in the PR profession.

Beyond professional institutes, academic associations also present valuable opportunities for NIPR to strengthen its influence in higher education and enhance PR training. While NIPR is statutorily responsible for regulating PR education, a

strategic approach to effective oversight involves formal partnerships with key academic associations whose members actively teach PR students across various institutions. Three notable associations in this regard are: the African Council for Communication Education (ACCE), the Association of Communication Scholars and Professionals of Nigeria (ACSPN), and the Association of Media and Communication Researchers of Nigeria (AMCRON). Notably, many members of these associations are also NIPR members, creating a natural synergy that NIPR can leverage. By fostering collaboration with these academic bodies, NIPR can play a more integrated and proactive role in shaping PR education, ensuring alignment with industry standards while promoting academic excellence.

The second component of the Tripartite Learning Model is the *academia*, which serves as the primary source of PR education through tertiary institutions. While theoretical knowledge is essential, academia can enhance student learning by integrating principles from systems theory. A systems-thinking approach to teaching encourages active student participation, helping them recognize connections between academic concepts and real-world applications. Educators must view students not just as learners but as members of a larger societal system, equipping them to identify, analyze, and solve real-world problems. Beyond traditional lectures, institutions must actively collaborate with industry partners to establish structured learning experiences. This includes developing programmes that expose students to practical, hands-on industry training before graduation. By fostering these connections, academia can ensure that students are not only well-versed in PR theory but also equipped with the skills and experiences needed to excel in the field.

A crucial aspect of developing an effective system is for educational institutions to proactively engage with companies that can offer valuable opportunities for students. Equally

important is adopting a participatory approach that moves beyond the traditional model of passive note-taking. Instead of a one-sided lecture format, students should be engaged in interactive tutorials that stimulate active learning. Johnson, Smith, Smythe, and Varon (2009) highlight the need for a new teaching paradigm that integrates elements from project-based learning, contextual teaching, and problem-based learning. This approach should focus on real-world issues, sparking students' curiosity and encouraging them to take ownership of their education. The model should emphasize problem-solving, provide students with 21st-century tools, and promote independent time management and collaboration. The role of educators in this paradigm should shift to that of mentors, guiding students through challenges.

Collaborations between academia and relevant industry partners can facilitate the creation of a challenge-based learning model, which tests students across all domains of learning while addressing real-world problems. Challenge-based learning can cover a very wide range of curriculum subjects since it draws its basis from real-world problems that students need to transform into solutions with local applicability. Challenge-based learning strategies, when regularly incorporated into the curriculum, organically facilitate the finding of appropriate content in a wide range of topic areas. Since the issues are real and do not require invention, students can relate what they are learning to real-world situations. The academia must create these systems.

The third component of the Tripartite Learning Model is the *marketing/public relations industry*, which ultimately benefits from the graduates produced by academia. When PR students receive thorough and effective training, the industry reaps the rewards in the form of skilled professionals. However, industry players should not wait for perfectly refined candidates before becoming involved in the training process. Public relations is

essential for every organization to manage its stakeholders effectively, making it crucial for industry leaders to take an active interest in the way future employees are educated. Through various professional associations and groups, industry players can adopt academic institutions offering PR education for mentorship and active engagement with students. Such partnerships can provide students with valuable guidance and role models in the field, motivating them to excel.

Additionally, the industry can organize PR Days with annual themes that challenge students to demonstrate what they have learned. This event can serve as an opportunity for realtime feedback and corrections, fostering a dynamic learning experience. This type of hands-on, industry-driven learning sparks genuine reflection and fuels students' desire to improve, driving them to become the best in their field.

Conclusion

Public relations education has evolved globally in this digital era, but not without some challenges to its pedagogy. Nigeria's experience is not different. These challenges are the result of the changing dynamics of society, particularly the advancement in technology. More so, the fact that learning has become highly practical requires that all hands must be on deck to rethink, review and realign PR education to suit the contemporary societal requirement for a fine-tuned PR professional. A tripartite learning model, which addresses the different roles of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR), academia and industry players, has been proposed with specific roles for each component in the model to take care of these requirements.

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