

# Administration of universities and channels of communication in Nigeria

## Abstract

Effective channels of communication are important in universities in Nigeria, because every administrative function and activity involve some form of direct or indirect communication. Whether planning and organizing or heading and monitoring, university administrators communicate with and through other people. One essential characteristic of successful universities is the proper channels of communication. Good academic performance is made up not of a series of isolated processes but a closely interrelated channels of communication which combine to produce an effective academic production. This paper was designed to clarify issues on administration and channels of communication in Nigerian universities. The specific objective of the paper was to determine the role of effective channels of communication in university administration. This paper also examines organizational structure, types and directions to channels of communication for effective university administration. It concluded that university administration is successful through communication flow in four directions— upward, downward, horizontal and vertical. Recommendations for improving administration in universities through directions to channels of communication in Nigeria were offered.

**Keywords:** universities, administration, organizational structure, communication, channels

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## Introduction

In Nigeria, the Universities are veritable tools for the realization of national development, the development of cultural citizens and promotion of basic research.<sup>1</sup> They transmit knowledge and train the human minds. The Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (2013) states that the goals of University Education are to: Intensify and diversify its programmes for development of high and manpower in the development of within the context of the needs of the nation.

Make professional course contents to reflect national requirement. Make all students as improvement in University education to offer general study courses such as the history of ideas, philosophy of knowledge and nationalism.

The ultimate aim of every university is to accomplish its set goals. The attainment of this noble target is always or Jeopardised by administrative structures put in place by the management. University administration is employees responsible for maintenance and supervision with joint responsibilities. Some types of administrative structure exist in Nigerian Universities, as they are administered by individuals involved in a number of planning, organizing, directing, controlling and evaluating activities of major units. Anyakoha et al.,<sup>2</sup> emphasised that Universities are successful in teaching and research because good administration provides the conditions in which it can flourish, just as more usually poor administration can undermine teaching and research. However, one essential characteristic of successful Universities is proper channels of communication. Good academic performance is made up not of a series of isolated processes but of a closely interrelated channels of communities which combine to produce an effective academic production.<sup>3</sup>

Effective channels of communication are important in Universities because every administrative function and activity involve some form of direct or indirect communication. Whether planning and

organizing or heading and monitoring, University administrators communicate with and through other people. This implies that every person's communication skills affect both personal and organizational effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> It seems reasonable to conclude that one of the most inability forces to organizational effectiveness is a lack of effective channels of communication.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, good channels of communication are very important to one's success as a university administrator. A recent study by Yate<sup>6</sup> indicated that school administrators rated communication skills as the most important characteristics of an ideal institution. University administration works best when each department and unit within the institution clearly understands its role and relationship to other departments and units and when communication among governing council, the administration and the faculty is regular, open and unmediated. Too often, the vice— chancellor serves as the sole consult for faculty council communication. While this practice may be efficient, it is not always effective in enhancing understanding between governing council and faculties.<sup>7</sup>

## Conceptual model for organizational channels of communication

The theoretical underpinning of the model come from theories of organizational communication<sup>8,9</sup> transaction cost analysis<sup>10,11</sup> and relational contracting theory.<sup>12</sup> By combining these theories, a complete picture of communication and information flows in an organisation is available for channels of communication.

Norms of organization sharing affect the nature of communication flows between channel members. In turn, the nature of these communication flow forms the basis for summary judgments about communication quality. An examination of the extent to which frequency, directionality and formality are associated with perceptions of quality of communication. Because of the need to

understand what factors predict opportunistic behavior, the formality of communication flows as one such factor which can inhibit the distortion and withholding of information.<sup>13</sup> Finally, in the model, the impact of communication flows on a dealer's satisfaction with communication is mediated by communication quality.

### Organizational structure and channels of communication in universities

The effort to realize organization basic responsibilities necessitates the need for a formal structure which could be organic or mechanistic for the provision of adequate resources which are human, material and time. These resources are coordinated and controlled under the auspices of well trained and dynamic leaders.<sup>14</sup> This could be described as organizational structure. Al-Hijji & AlBadi<sup>15</sup> elucidated that organization structure is the formal system of task and reporting relationships that coordinates and motivates organizational members to work together, to achieve organizational goals. Mullins<sup>16,17</sup> described the structure of an organization as the pattern of relationship between roles and its different parts. The structure of the organization varies from simple organization to complex ones. Thus, Hall<sup>18</sup> identified three basic rationales for an organizational structure which include the production of organizational output, regulating the influence of individual variations and controlling the exercise of powers. For an organization such as the university to achieve synergy for success as noted by Masshank<sup>19</sup> it would require the manager's ability to coordinate and integrate its manpower and other resources.

The term organizational structure refers to the formally prescribed pattern of relationships existing between various units of an organization.<sup>20</sup> An organization's structure typically is described using a diagram, known as an organizational chart. Such diagrams provide

graphic representations of the formal pattern of communication in an organization. An organization chart may be likened to an X-ray showing the organization's skeleton, an outline of the planned, formal connections between individuals in various departments or units.<sup>21</sup> This defines university administration with job functions and hierarchy.

An organizational chart consists of various boxes and the lines connecting them. The lines connecting the boxes in the organizational chart are lines of authority showing who must answer to whom—that is, reporting relationships. Each person is responsible for answers to the person at the next higher level to which he or she is connected. At the same time, people are also responsible for (or give orders to) those who are immediately below them. The boxes and lines form a blueprint of an organization showing not only what people have to do (jobs performed including appropriate job titles), but with whom they have to communicate for the organization to operate properly.<sup>22</sup>

The organisational structure in Nigerian universities could be described as being complex due to their fragmentation, participatory in decision-making, centralization of authority and high level of formalisation.<sup>23</sup> The prominent actors in the organization structure for the day to day activities in the management of most universities are visitor (founder), Chancellor, Pro-Chancellor (Chairman of council), Governing council, senate, Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellor(s), Registrar, Bursar, University Librarian, Director of Works, Director of Physical Planning and Development, Director of Academic Planning and Control, the Provosts, Deans of Faculties, Head of Departments and Directors of Academics, Heads of Division, Heads of Units, students. A typical example of an organisational structure of a state University in Nigeria is depicted below (Figure 1):

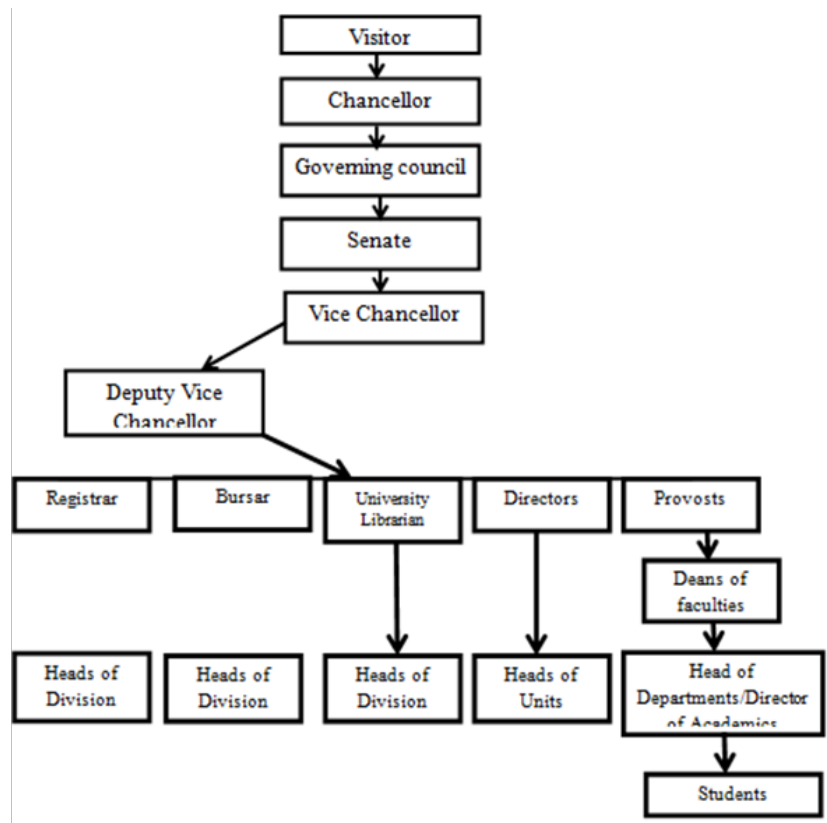


Figure 1 Organizational Structure and Channels of Communication.

The basic process of communication is similar with many different features. One unique feature of an organization has an impact on the communication process, namely its structures.<sup>24</sup> An organization structure influences the communication patterns within the organization. The structure of an organization should provide channels of communication. Organizations are often structured in ways that dictate the communication patterns that exist.<sup>23</sup>

### Channels of communication in universities

Communication channels are the means through which people in an organization communicates. Thought must be given to what channels are used to complete various tasks because using all inappropriate channels for a task or interaction can lead to negative consequences. Complex messages require richer channels of communication that facilitate interaction to ensure clarity. The communication channels can flow down from superiors or across from and to co-workers of the same hierarchical level of authority. Organizations have several types of communication channels like verbal, written and non-verbal. Verbal communication is spoken communication used in day to day activities with no record kept unless the communication is recorded in the team meetings and live presentations. Written communications include any communication done with the written word including letters, memos and even a simple note scratched out on a napkin. Written communication is a much more formal channel of communication which permits your time to think and process your message sense before sending it and achieve the message for use later. It can be impersonal means of communication like policies, letters, memo, manuals, notices and announcements.

Non-verbal communication actually communicates without saying or writing anything. It involves using body language, to send cues, such as happiness, satisfaction, anger, worry and fear. In order to make a University administrator's task easier, the types of communication channels should be at face-to-face, group and organisational levels.

Face-to-face or personal communication is one of the richest channels of communication that can be used within the university. The best benefits of face to face communication are that it's personal and bidirectional. It improves the speaking, writing and presentation skills of administrators. When you interact with someone, it's easier to build rapport and enhance trust. Also speaking in person, you can pick up on non-verbal cues that would be missed by sending an e-mail. This includes speeches team meetings, focus groups, brown bag lunches, social events and gathering and management by wandering around. Group-levels communication occurs in teams units and employee resource or interest groups. The focus on these levels is information sharing, issue, discussion, task, problem-solving and consensus building. Organization-level communication focused on such matters as vision and mission, policies, new initiatives and organizational knowledge and performance. This communication often follows a cascade approach where administrator at hierarchical channels communicates with their respective staff. Personal communication networks in University organization can be formal, informal or unofficial.

Formal communication channels written or oral, transmit information such as the goals, policies and procedures on organization messages. This type of communication channel follows a chain of command. This means information official through desired channels of the message to the next level staff. This includes circulars, board meetings, staff meetings, departmental meetings or workgroup

meetings done to enforce organisational rules and regulations. It is usually found on organisational charts, policy manuals or hierarchical structures. Informal communication is a communication between operations depicted in an organisational chart which does not function as smooth or as trouble-free as the chart may imply. In most organizations, operative channels of communication have developed outside the hierarchical structure. This type of interaction does not reflect officially designated channels of communication. The grapevine emerges from social and personal interests of the employees rather than the formal requirement of the organisational communication is inherent and even necessary aspects of organisational life. The commonly informal communication include brown-bagging gathering, Lunch with the chancellor, town hall meetings. Other informal channels are twitter, facebook, videos, cartoons, mode of dressing and talking. It creates a relaxed, comfortable climate. Unofficial communication channels recognize the fact that sometimes communication that takes places within an organization is interpersonal. The minutes of a meeting may be a topic of discussion among employees, sports, politics and TV shows share the floor, while the ideal communication web is a formal structure in which informal communication can take place. Unofficial communication channel exists in an organization. Through these various channels, it is important for the University administrator to get his/her ideas across and then listen, absorb, clean and further communicate to his staff.

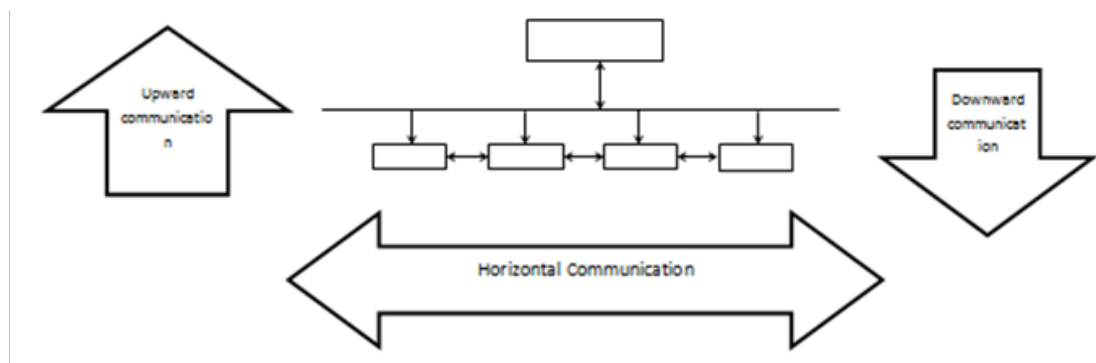
The common formal and informal channels of communication through new technologies in universities are e-mail, news letter, portal and social media, broadcast media, mobile electronic like voice mail, intranets, blogs, podcasts, chartroom, business TV, Video conferencing, instant messages, system wikis and electronic town hall meetings.

According to Haris & Nelson<sup>25</sup> communication channels of a university administrator, consumes fifty percent (50%) of his time for listening, twenty percent (20%) for writing, twenty percent (20%) for talking and ten percent (10%) for reading. Effective listening is crucial to learning; understanding, conflict resolution and productive teamwork. It helps administrators in universities improve employee morale, retain employees and uncover and resolve problems. Yet, many studies suggest that most administrators are not good listeners and few organisations devote resources to developing listening skills in leaders. Leadership styles also affect communication channels. Bureaucratic leaders tend to slow down communication by chatting to make sure that every part of message and delivery method follow strict university guidelines. This can weaken communication channel and prevent employees from setting instructions and information they need to do their jobs.<sup>26</sup>

To determine the appropriate communication channel, identify the people you want to communicate with, research how they obtain information, consider the complexity of the message you want to communicate, calculate the cost of communicating and decide whether you want the communication to be interactive.<sup>27</sup>

### Directions of university formal communication channels

The structure of an organisation should provide for communication in four distinct directions: downward, upward, horizontal and vertical.<sup>28</sup> These four directions establish the framework within which communication in an organisation takes place. These communication flows are depicted below (Figure 2).



**Figure 2** Downward, upward, horizontal and vertical communication in Universities.

### Downward communication

Traditional views of the communication process in universities have been dominated by downward communication flows. Such flows transmit information from higher to lower levels of the university organization. University leaders, from central office administrators to building-level administrators, communicate downward to group members through speeches, messages in University bulletins, University board policy manuals, and school procedure handbooks. The types of messages are job instructions, job rationales and practices information, feedback and indoctrination. It is efficient and fast with managerial control.

Canary (2011) has identified five general purposes of downward communication:

1. Implementation of goals, strategies, and objectives. Communicating new strategies and goals provides information about specific targets and expected behaviours. It gives direction for lower levels of the university/university district, community college, or university. For example: "The new reform mandate is for real. We must improve the quality of student learning if we are to succeed."
2. Job instructions and rationale. These are directives on how to do a specific task and how the job relates to other activities of the University organization. Schools, community colleges, or universities need to coordinate individual and departmental objectives with organization-wide goals. We often fail to provide enough of this kind of information, leaving it to the individual staff member to get the big picture.
3. Procedures and practices. These are messages defining the school organization's policies, rules, regulations, benefits, and structural arrangements in order to get some degree of uniformity in organization practices. In University organizations, this information is transmitted to staff members through a board and organization-wide policy manuals, handbooks, and the day-to-day operation of the school organization.
4. Performance feedback. Departmental progress reports, individual performance appraisals, and other means are used to tell departments or individuals how well they are doing with respect to performance standards and goals. For example: "Mary, your work on the computer terminal has greatly improved the efficiency of our department."
5. Socialization. Every University organization tries to motivate staff members to adopt the institution's mission and cultural values and to participate in special ceremonies, such as picnics

and United Way campaigns. It is an attempt to get a commitment, a sense of belonging, and a unity of direction among staff members.<sup>28</sup> For example: "The university employees as family and would like to invite everyone to attend the annual picnic and fair on May 30."

The downward flow of communication provides a channel for directives, instructions, and information to University members. However, much information gets lost as it is passed from one person to another. Moreover, the message can be distorted if it travels a great distance from its sender to the ultimate receiver down through the formal University hierarchy.<sup>29</sup>

### Upward communication

The behaviourists emphasised the establishment of upward communication flows. In universities, this refers to communication that travels from staff member to leader (administrator). This is necessary not only to determine if staff members have understood information sent downward but also need the ego needs of staff. The type of messages are the performance on the job, related problems follow employees and their problems, subordinates perceptions of organisation policies and practices, tables and procedures. It promotes morale among all employees, it has no enough superiors encourage subordinate. Five test of information communicated upward in a university organisation are as follows:<sup>30</sup>

1. Problems and exceptions. These messages describe serious problems and exceptions to routine performance in order to make the leader aware of difficulties.
2. Suggestions for improvement. These messages are ideas for improving task-related procedures to increase the quality or efficiency of organisation members.
3. Performance reports. These messages include periodic reports that inform the leader how individual organisation members and departments are performing.
4. Grievances and disputes. These messages are employee complaints and conflicts that travel up the school organisation hierarchy for a hearing and possible resolution. If the grievance procedure is backed up by the presence of a collective bargaining agreement, organisation members are even more encouraged to express true feelings.
5. Financial and accounting information. These messages pertain to costs, accounts receivable, interest on investments, tax levies, and other matters of interest to the board, central administration, and building-level administrators.



Ideally, the organisational structure should provide for upward and downward communication flows. It should also provide vertical or horizontal communication. Communication should travel in all direction through the formal university hierarchy. Unfortunately, from the bottom communication does not flow as freely as communication from the top. Some barriers to effective channels of communication in universities are as follows:<sup>31</sup>

1. Administrators fail to respond when staff members bring up information or problems. Failure to respond will ultimately result in no communication.
2. Administrators tend to be defensive about less- than- perfect actions. When staff members see this defensiveness, information will be withheld.
3. The administrator's attitude plays a critical role in the channels of communication flow. If the administrator is really concerned and really listens, then upward communication improves.
4. Physical barriers can also inhibit communication flow. Separating an administrator from his/her staff members creates common problems.
5. Time lags between the communication and the action can inhibit upward communication. If it takes months for the various levels of administration to approve a staff members suggestion, upward communication is hindered.

### Horizontal communication

Upward and downward communication flows generally follow the formal hierarchy within the school organisation. However, greater size and complexity of organisations increase the need for communication laterally or diagonally across the lines of the formal chain of command. This is referred to as horizontal communication. These communications are informational too but in a different way than downward and upward communication. Here information is basically for coordination to tie together activities within or across departments on a single school campus or within divisions in a school- wide organisational system. Horizontal communication falls into one of three categories:<sup>30</sup>

1. Intradepartmental problem- solving. These messages take place between members of the same department in a school or division in a school- wide organisational system and concern task accomplishment.
2. Interdepartmental coordination. Interdepartmental messages facilitate the accomplishment of joint projects or tasks in a school or divisions in a school- wide organisational system.
3. Staff advice to line departments. These messages often go from specialists in academic areas, finance, or computer service to campus- level administrators seeking help in these areas.
4. In brief, horizontal communication flows exist to enhance coordination. This horizontal channel permits a lateral or diagonal flow of messages, enabling units to work with other units without having to follow rigidly up and down channels. Many universities build in horizontal communications in the form of task forces, committees, liaison personnel, or matrix structures to facilitate coordination.

### Vertical communication

Vertical communication can be downward flowing down the

hierarchy of an organisation or upward, i.e moving from lower organisation to higher levels in the chain of command. Diagonal or omnidirectional communication occurs among employees at different levels and in different functions e.g accountant and system analysis.<sup>32</sup> Evolving university organisational structures and technologies create opportunities for new and conflicting communications flow.<sup>33</sup>

In short, the flow of communication in a University organisation is intended to provide channels for the feedback of information up the hierarchy. Some deterrents may prevent a good return flow but they are ways to promote more effective administrator- staff communication.

### External communication channels

External communication flows between employees inside the organisation and with a variety of stakeholders outside the organisation. External stakeholders include other administrators external to the organisation, parents, government officials, community residents, and so forth. Many universities external communication channels include the website, the internet, personal dialogue, events and seminars, media, newsletter, management newspaper, direct mail and advertising the physical campus environment and signs organisations, created formal departments such as a public relations office, to coordinate their external communications.<sup>34</sup>

### Conclusion

Organisational structure influences communication patterns within an organisation. Communications flow in four directions—downward, upward, horizontally and vertical. Downward communication consists of policies, rules, and procedures that flow from top administration to lower levels. Upward communication consists of the flow of performance reports, grievances, and other information from lower to higher levels. Horizontal communication is essentially coordinative and occurs between departments or divisions on the same level. Vertical communication can be flowing downward or upward hierarchy of the university. External communication flows between employees inside the organisation and a variety of stakeholders outside the organisation.

### Recommendations

The following are some recommendations for improving university administration through effective channels of communication.

1. The open- door policy. Taken literally, this means that the administrator's door is always open to staff members. It is an invitation for staff to come in and talk about any problem they may have. In practice, the open- door policy is seldom used. The administrator may say: "My door is always open," but in many cases, both the staff member and the administrator know the door is really closed. Typically, this does not occur in a learning organisation.<sup>35,36</sup>
2. Counselling, attitude questionnaires and exit interviews. The leader can greatly facilitate upward communication by conducting nondirective, confidential counselling sessions; periodically administering attitude surveys, and holding exit interviews for those who leave the organisation. Much valuable information can be gained from these forms of communication.
3. Participative techniques. Group decision making can generate a great deal of upward communication. This may be accomplished by the use of union- management committees, quality circles, suggestion boxes, site- based councils, and the like.

4. The ombudsperson. The use of an ombudsperson can be utilised to provide an outlet for persons who have been treated unfairly or in a depersonalised manner by large, bureaucratic governments.<sup>37–39</sup> More recently, it has gained popularity in universities.<sup>40–45</sup> If developed and maintained properly, it may win where the open–door policy has failed.
5. The union contract. A prime objective of the union is to convey to the administration the feelings and demands of various employee groups. Collective bargaining session constitutes a legal channel of communication for any aspect of employer–employee relations. A typical provision of every union contract is the grievance procedure. It is a mechanism for appeal beyond the authority of the immediate supervisor.
6. The grapevine. Although leaders may be reluctant to use the grapevine, they should always listen to it. The grapevine is a natural phenomenon that serves as a means of emotional release for staff members and provides the administrator with significant information concerning the attitudes and feelings of staff members

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## Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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