

General studies: The intellectual meeting point for all disciplines in tertiary institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

All over the world universities have the general studies programme otherwise called GSP. It gets students familiar with other subjects or fields of study. The general studies programme was designed consciously to bring about desirable changes which will better prepare young Nigerian undergraduates to the tasks of prosecuting and providing solutions to the problems of climate change, insecurity, refugees, corruption, gender politics, terrorism etc. Its main objective is to avoid a single track educational system where a student is taught only the course he or she was admitted to study which was obtainable before the 1960s. It was meant to provide intellectual meeting point for all disciplines and inculcate in the students a broad based education which widens the students' intellectual horizons. The importance of general studies is to make scholars versatile in virtually every aspect of the social life and civility rather than being champions of their particular field of study and very deficient in other fields of learning. The study fosters intelligibility, effective communication in English language and keeps students with fundamentals of the Humanities, Natural and Social sciences thereby empower them to proffer solution to basic social problems at graduation. Hence, the major thesis of this article is that with the General studies programme, the tertiary institutions are designed to produce professionals who are knowledgeable, competent and skilled to face the challenges in our country. This

is to say that without it, there would be no balanced network system in the training of individuals. Critical analysis and expository methods will be adopted as research methodology in the work.

Keywords: general studies programme, education, development, skill acquisition.

Introduction

Education is a deliberate process that involves the transmission of what society considers valuable or worthwhile from generation. It is a means to an end and not an end in itself. The aim of education is to create developed human beings who can manage political institutions, the hospitals, nursing services, entrepreneurial demands, research demands, etc. It is the foundation on which the social, economic and technological development of a nation is built. According to Felleke (2005) “education is an instrument adopted by nations of the world to direct human resource along an appropriate part to achieve production and growing societies.” Thus, in fashioning out the educational philosophy of a nation, the needs of that nation must be kept in focus. Any educational philosophy that is opposed to the needs (whether social, economic and technological) of a nation will be stultifying.

Generally speaking, education, in its formal and informal hue, is a process. It is an ongoing process through which the cultural heritage of a society gets transmitted from generation to generation. In its formal hue, it is done deliberately by society through schools, colleges, universities and other institutions (Ezewu 32). For D.J. O’Connor, quoted by Ezewu, the “educational system of any community is a more or less an

elaborate mechanism by a society to instill in individuals certain skills and attitudes that are judged to be useful and desirable in society” (32). This implies that education is not just book knowledge but embodies life skills for individual survival. It was in this connection that O’Connor also said that the business of education is to develop the individual person and prepare him to function effectively in society. It also frees us from the dark hell-holes of ignorance, fear of the unknown and the unfamiliar.

Education involves developing and learning to use one’s mind in the most creative way. For Festus C. Okafor, education is that process of acculturation through which the individual is helped to attain the development of his potentialities and their maximum activation when necessary, according to right reason and to achieve thereby his perfect self-fulfillment (16). From what Okafor is saying, education involves the development of human personality such that the talents and gifts of the individual can be awakened and strengthened. As Fafunwa (2004) noted, the successive governments had hoped to use education and general study as tool for promoting national unity, security and for the total development of the individual, as well as equipping the individual with appropriate knowledge and skills for adaptation into the larger society and for sustainable national development.

Tertiary education

Every nation sees in higher education via its traditional roles of teaching, research and community services to evolve manpower and transmit needed knowledge that are required in industry and other spheres of the nation’s existence. The National Policy on Education and major Reforms and innovations recently introduced into the Nigerian educational system “Tertiary education is the education giving after secondary school in

universities, colleges of education, polytechnics, including those institutions offering correspondence courses”. It went ahead to pronounce the goals of tertiary education in Nigeria as, to (a) contribute to national development through high level relevant manpower training (b) develop and inculcate proper values for the survival of the individual and society (c) develop the intellectual capability of individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environment (d) acquire both physical and intellectual skills which will enable individuals to be self reliant and useful members of the society (e) promote and encourage scholarship and community service (f) forge and cement national unity (g) promote national and international understanding and interaction. General studies programme was introduced into Nigerian universities in order to effectively actualize the stated goals.

History of general studies

Inside any human being there are innate potentials, goodness, skills and talents, which only effective education can help to bring out. General studies program, in this respect, is seen as “instruments that help to bring out the best in every man” (Akinpelu cited in Kalu, 2013: 41). The general studies programme (GSP) over the years has been very instrumental to the versatility of Nigerian graduates scattered all over the world. General education alludes to the democratization of the dividends of education, the inculcation of certain critical values into the beneficiaries of such objectives of education. The institution of general studies in Nigerian universities originated with the university law 1961, (E.N.L. No 21, of 1961, status 6) as “the college of General Studies included in the thirty-six colleges listed for establishment. Later National University Commission

(NUC) in 1989 approved minimum academic requirement for General Studies for all Nigeria Universities making General studies courses compulsory for all categories of studies. In 1989 the minimum Academic Standards (MAS) document was put in place and it became a basis for accreditation of universities. In 2002, the Entrepreneurship course was added to the program. This is to broaden the scope of the GST program incorporating teaching house skills to be acquired for self-sustenance and reliance of the eventual university graduates and the attendant benefit to the country.

General Studies Program in tertiary institutions is not peculiar to Nigeria, since it entails broadening the thinking scope of students beyond the immediate disciplines. It is common knowledge that many countries have adopted general studies as a program on the understanding that the training will be useful to them and society, many countries adopt the program. Troy University in Alabama, United States of America (USA) for instance has the program as a common curriculum of courses for first and second year students which they take as constituting a good background for life's journey. At Webster University, Missouri, also in the United States of America (USA), there is a Bachelor of Arts (BA) Degree course in General Studies which they view as an inter-disciplinary course to help students and enable them contribute positively to the society. General studies as part of the curriculum of most tertiary institutions in Nigeria and Africa came into being as the originators of this concept and philosophy aimed at eliminating what is generally referred to as compartmentalization of knowledge and harmful academic narrow mindedness.

The General Studies and its philosophical import

The General Studies programmes (GSP) are a set of courses in the tertiary educational system where the students are exposed to areas other than their core areas of discipline (Chukwuanukwu, Chukwuanukwu, Adirika, Okika, Okeke, and Oguejiofor, 2016). It is the compendium of compulsory courses that a university requires her students to take, regardless of their major disciplines, particularly at the undergraduate level. The General Studies is a program designed to provide an intellectual meeting point for all disciplines, expand the intellectual horizon of students and therefore provide a broad-based, people-oriented and self-reliant education. The University of Arizona U.S.A describes general studies as “broader, multidisciplinary course of study rather than a traditional major/minor that prepares students to think critically and analytically across a wide range of disciplines or fields of study” (<http://clas.arizona.edu/general-studies/about-bgs-degree>).

The General Studies courses are meant to expose students to greater awareness about other disciplines of study with a view to making them perform better in their chosen field of study, understand and contribute more meaningfully to other spheres of nation building, and become better members of the society on the long run. The program was made compulsory in all territory institutions in Nigeria by the directives of General Olusegun Obasanjo, the then head of state, on October 22, 1977.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) and the National Board for Technical Education (NBTE), the regulatory bodies for university and polytechnic education respectively, recognize the general studies courses as compulsory requirements for their accreditation of any degree-awarding or diploma-awarding program in Nigeria today.

General Studies program is aimed at producing graduates with all round knowledge that can help them to translate objectives into reality and adapt effectively to any environment defined themselves after graduation. In a nutshell, the main purpose and spirit of the General Studies program is to acquaint all the students with the methodologies and technologies for an understanding of Nigeria's heritage and the social and scientific aspects of the world today (University of Nigeria School of General Studies Undergraduate Academic Handbook, p.6). The great Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, the major founding father of the above named university, had the strong belief that only a university with broad-based educational program at its "backbone" – that is, the General Studies – could meet the recommendations of the Phelps-Stokes Commission on African education. The knowledge of appropriate skills, competencies and dispositions will make them globally competitive and capable of contributing meaningfully in Nigeria's socio-economic development.

General education provides students with the opportunity to enhance their ability to think critically, develop their communication and mathematical skills, stimulate their capacities for creative, innovative thinking and enrich their knowledge of the wider socio-cultural and natural world in which they will live and work. It ensures that students achieve both breadth and depth in the skills and justification of knowledge.

Given the variability of careers and employment together with the various unforeseen directions that personal development may take, general education is dedicated to students' need for both the necessary capacities for life-long learning and a knowledge base that is transferable across academic disciplines and vocational contexts. General education curriculum strives to

provide a basis on which students can develop awareness of the intellectual, moral, aesthetic and social contexts of their lives. The aim of General studies is to produce graduates capable of directing projects in fields outside their areas of specialization in order to foster societal sustainable development.

Worthy of note are the varied benefits derivable from exposing Nigerian students to general studies program. Among them are the opportunity of achieving effective communication in English Language and keeps students abreast with fundamentals of the Humanities, Natural and Social sciences thereby, empowering them to proffer solutions to basic social problems. According NUC (2007) the GSP is “to equip Nigerian graduates from universities with appropriate knowledge and skill, competences and dispositions to make them globally competitive and capable of contributing meaningfully to Nigeria’s socio-economic development. To expose students to a course of liberal education through which they can develop and expand awareness of their social, cultural and natural environments. With the addition of these courses to the specialized courses being taken by the student, it is expected that graduates would be better prepared to function in the society. It aims at helping students develop adequate competence in the use of the English Language as a tool for their studies and as an effective means of communication in society and in their future employment/enterprise. The General Studies enables students acquire a body of relevant knowledge outside their respective fields of specialization for successful living. It equips students with certain intellectual as well as entrepreneurial skills if they are to understand the complex dynamics of the modern society.

As a multidisciplinary program it requires study in a variety of areas that include philosophy, science, social science, medical

and citizenship education etc. The General Studies program provides opportunities for the students to acquire knowledge through critical information gathering including reading and computer assisted searching, communicate effectively in both written and oral English Language and have some working knowledge of the French language. It enables them to make critical judgments in a logical and rational manner. It also helps the students to gain understanding of ethnic interdependence and cultural diversity and develop consideration, values, lifestyles and traditions of the various ethnic groups in Nigeria.

Moreover, the exposure to General studies equally enables them acquire proper value orientation which will enable cultivation of desirable habits, attitudes, patriotism, nationalism and foster the development of spirit of service to humanity. It enables them to acquire effective working schemes to make them employable and also develop entrepreneurial skills that will enable them become employers of labour. It aims at producing graduates with the broad knowledge of the Nigerian nation and people with a view to inculcating in them mutual understanding and patriotism.

However, one of the founding fathers of the General Studies Program Babs A. Fafunwa, outlined the underlined principles of the general courses thus:

1. The most important aspect of any man is his belief system, that is the sum total of the propositions which he takes to be true.
2. Such a belief system cannot be articulated without the ability to handle language effectively.
3. One can distinguish three dimensions of belief systems – those concerned with the social world in which man lives and which lives in each man, the natural world which forms man's physical environment and all of which his body is composed,

and the world of value as it is expressed in religion, literature are and philosophy.

4. That it is possible to put into four courses of study a subject matter which when presented in an appropriate manner can improve man's belief system.
5. That every student in the university should be allowed to participate in these courses (14).

General Studies as the intellectual meeting point for all disciplines

The general education program encourages intellectual discovery and critical reflection, promotes an appreciation of the various modes of human inquiry and develops the knowledge and skills to succeed in and contribute to the world at large. Most of the various disciplines aim at making the student a specialist. The general studies program is different. According to Okwor (2010: 16) "while other programs were designed to develop special technical skills, the general studies program had as its purpose, the development of human resources as exemplified in comprehensively educated minds and character. The general studies courses are designed to provide a holistic and balanced education across the disciplines. In its major current designs, the general study programmes in our Nigeria as the case study, are focused on exposing the future graduates and potential human capital components of the political economy to different vistas of knowledge that would make them not to become "educated illiterates" upon graduation. The unit is also designed to coordinate multi-disciplinary studies that could broaden the knowledge and widen the academic horizons of students of the University in all Departments and Faculties. The university remains a universe for learning, a *Studium Generale* where every

form of knowledge meets their seekers. Thus the General Studies Programme was as a matter of fact, formulated to be the backbone, a kind of “central processing unit” of the total academic disciplines of the University. This x-rayed the aims and objectives of the GSP which includes; “to establish the broad basis of knowledge required for effective modern citizenship and to indicate the unity of existence by stressing the inter relationship of all knowledge. A well streamlined GSP curriculum gives the graduates and graduates in the proximate potency a well deserved opportunity to learn something of classics, humanities, Arts and Science, irrespective of one’s field of specialization and in the words of Ebo; “it is this brand of curriculum with subjects which cut across neighbouring disciplines in the effort to bring to bear a multi-disciplinary arsenal to the analysis and understanding of problems. As an intellectual meeting point, it enables students appreciate the inter relationship among disciplines in an integrated world, which is fast becoming one big village. Hence it offers the potential for bridging the gaps in human knowledge, thereby preparing the students to meet the challenges of the changing world adequately.

General Studies Program and its associated challenges

To be more specific, educational sector and its coterminous general studies in Nigeria are defined by poor funding, mediocrity through quota system, indigene/non-indigene dichotomy, catchment areas, equality of states, federal character, educationally disadvantaged states etc. The GSP was initially criticized and ridiculed by the educated masses, the students, and other categories of the society as an aberration unworthy of a serious University, but all these changed as the pioneer graduates of the university surprised the nation by their performance over

the years as a result of a broadened scope of reasoning and the body of knowledge.

Lawal (2013: 28) argues that “the education we receive and our children are receiving now is geared towards almost the same objectives with the colonial education, to work in government offices, carry on with the administration in the government spirit and fight poverty”. The implication of the colonial style of educational system in Nigeria is the flaccid and despicable nature of educational sector in Nigeria. The Nigerian national planning commission described the countries educational system as dysfunctional, reasons being decayed institutions and ill-prepared graduates. This situation is further compounded by corrupt practices and weak operational and management capacities of various institutions and higher learning in Nigeria.

Nwaokugha and Ezeugwu (2017) were of the view that “corruption lays in wait for learners in Nigeria on the day of their first attempts to gain entry or entrance into the gates of pre-primary education and remains through the other tiers of the education system” (7). In Nigerian higher institutions, we see dilapidated infrastructures, laboratories, demonstration rooms and lecture halls etc and any attempt to solve these problems result in strike actions which usually destroys the academic calendar. According to Okeke et al (2003), the General Studies program was criticized by many as an idle aberration, unworthy of the attention of a serious University, a watering down of standards, and an unnecessary encroachment upon the time they should have devoted to their various areas of specialization.

General Studies courses

To propagate this program, NUC identified the following courses as its constituents: use of English, introduction to logic and

philosophy, use of library, peace studies and conflict resolution, history and philosophy of science, introduction to Entrepreneurial skills/studies. General studies courses are aimed at producing an individual well fitted for the contemporary society. General studies courses are compulsory for all the students who are supposed to offer them. The courses are coordinated centrally and examined in the semester in which they are taught. All the courses are computed as part of the Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of every student. The general studies program through its organized courses is expected to equip individuals/students to live creatively, responsibly and peacefully in a society and become agents of change for a better society. The general studies, through its articulated program is unique because it is designed to mold students into what Lipset (1967) calls “members of the elite”. Furthermore, Ihenetu (2015) notes that the intent of these general studies courses is to get students acquainted with other general studies of importance outside the scope or field of study of the students department or faculty. Also, University of Ibadan is of the view the program makes the students aware of their sociocultural, and natural environment and that the students will go out better prepared to function in the society. Some of the courses offered in some Nigerian universities are briefly discussed below:

The Use of English: The Use of English is important because English is the most commonly spoken language in the world. It is the language of international business. It helps one to understand other languages. English has a long and fascinating history that spans wars, invasions and influences from around the globe. It helps one to say things in a hundred different ways. If you have the basics of English Language then you can make yourself

understood in nearly every corner of the world. It is also the language of the internet. Hence, on the internet the majority of websites are written and created in English. At the university level, students in many countries study all their subjects in English in order to make the material more accessible to international students. Moreover, English is the primary language of the press, more news papers and books are written in English than in any other language. English skills will also help you in any business venture you choose to follow. It is also worthy of note that any business company will hire their professional staff after getting to know whether the people they are hiring are good at English or not. To sum it up, the use of English was brought in as a finishing course in Nigeria Universities with the following main objectives:

- (a) To offer students in all the departments a sound foundation and functional mastery of the English language in its various uses.
- (b) To breed able and inspiring users of English who can assert themselves as expected.
- (c) To enable students to understand adequate approaches of organizing time, taking, organizing and developing notes.
- (d) To enable students to understand how to utilize the library adequately.

http://www.unijos.edu.ng/course_content/gst/GST%20CURRICULUM%20FULL%20DOC%20_%20final%20%20copy_%202.pdf
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Introduction to Philosophy and Logic: This exposes students to the knowledge of philosophy, which is a reflection on human experience. It is the knowledge of everything which deals with every question of life. It is a reflective discipline that solves

problems through thinking and prescribes values. On the other hand, logic is the most important branch of philosophy and serves as a bench mark for other branches of philosophy. It should be noted that without knowledge of logic, no student of philosophy can adequately study his subject matter. This is because logic is the science of reason and indeed, reason guides all philosophical investigations. A good knowledge of logic helps logicians and students of logic to systematically differentiate between correct and incorrect reasoning and thus be able to engage in sound logical argumentation. Thus, as scientists use litmus paper to test for acidity or alkalinity, philosophers and students of philosophy use logic to test for sound and unsound reasoning. However, Philosophy per se is the queen of all disciplines and thus a broader GSP should necessarily involve some formal tour into philosophy. In furtherance, Anichebe opines that logic and philosophy together with other GSP courses, contribute immensely in making a university graduate a complete whole, academically instead of just being a narrow specialist in his/her chosen discipline.

Nigeria People and Culture: This course introduces undergraduates to the socio-economic and political history and culture of Nigerian peoples. It traces the pre-colonial histories and the culture of various areas of Nigeria as well as the evolution of the country as a political unit. It gives the students the sound knowledge of the tradition and culture of Nigerians peoples, analyzes the impact of cultural values and explained the evolution of Nigeria as a political unit. Hence, general studies program helps in an important manner in building cultural bridges through the acquisition of proper knowledge of culture.

Peace Education: Peace education motivates people to take responsibility of their own behaviour and actions to handle conflict resolutions and make good sustainable choices in their everyday environment that adds to peaceful co-existences. Peace education activities promote the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will help people either to prevent the occurrence of conflict, resolve conflict peacefully or create social condition conducive to peace. This implies that core values of non violence and social justice are central to peace education.

Use of Library: The library provides different information resources and services geared towards the enhancement of academic achievement. The course is designed to enable students acquired the required skill to efficiently and effectively exploit the library resources and service and learn skills necessary for locating, sifting, evaluating and sorting information sources. The question why study the use of library is like asking why does the library exist. The same way library exists to support the parent organization (the university) in achieving its objectives is the same way the study of the use of library will help students, researchers and other library users to overcome the barrier and discouragement to information access and the use to achieve the academic pursuit. Hence the quality of education depends on the use made of the library and its resources.

Entrepreneurial Studies: It was designed to increase the achievement motivation in our youths through the psychological empowerment obtainable from entrepreneurship training. Another aim is to instill in our youths the capacity for independence thought, economic freedom and creativity. The ideal of creating this curriculum is to breed graduates with some added values

beyond their particular area of study for sole aim of self reliance. Its focus is to re-channel education/training for relevance and quality by building in the undergraduate/graduate an entrepreneurial frame of mind and furnishing each with the skills requisite to being and manage a business successfully.

History and Philosophy of Science: The history and philosophy of science is an academic discipline that encompasses the philosophy of science and the history of science. The study of the history and philosophy of science affords a broader appreciation of science, its nature and fundamentals, its origins and its place in modern politics, culture and society. In the history of science, traditional historical method are used to develop an understanding of how the sciences originated, how they were practiced, how they developed and how they are related to their intellectual and social contexts. In philosophy of science, the sciences themselves are brought under philosophical scrutiny. We investigate the nature of science in general, what distinguishes scientific activity, how theories are explained, how they are confirmed, whether they should be read literally and the moral dilemmas raised by the sciences. This is aimed as familiarizing the students with primary knowledge of the humble beginning of science and technology. While keeping them informed of cotemporary happenings and improvements in different areas of science and technology, it lays emphasis on how different avenues in this different areas of study directly touch the society, the environment, the individual, the nation and the world in general.

Conclusion

The student of today is being prepared to be able to face and surmount the challenges of tomorrow. General studies aims at

making students have broader knowledge of the various discipline courses, unlike the others that aim at making the student “a specialist”. It is instrumental to the versatility of Nigerian graduates scattered all over the world. It has ensured that students take courses that are entirely different from the core discipline as a way of being better informed and molding more rounded graduates. Hence, the young Nigeria graduates must be ready to tackle the contemporary issues of the 21st century which includes terrorism, climate change, corruption, gender, value reorientation, security, peace and conflict issues, unemployment etc. The best platform for doing so is the general’s studies program. The liberal framework of the general studies was designed to address the issue of “colonial mentality” which was possible because the colonial education imprisoned the African intellectual potentialities and denied them avenues for meaningful expressions.

Furthermore, in tertiary education, general education/studies provide an interdisciplinary environment that allows students to understand and integrate the liberal Arts and Sciences as the intellectual meeting point of knowledge. The general studies program can serve as a veritable platform for achieving and implementing SDGs, education vision of ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. General studies program is a foundation for a rounded tertiary education. It is also seen as a veritable instrument in the process of national development. This can best be manifested in a plural society like Nigeria by having program that encourage integration and participation of most citizens in the enhancement of democratic practice, devoid of rancor and distractions. Federal government should ensure a level playing field for all Nigerians Universities propagating the GSP by

allowing them access to TETFUND. The aim of general or general education is accordingly the engendering of solution in universal decibels. Simply put, the students are leaders of tomorrow and as such any training for them should be whole, not one sided

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