

Liberal Education in Nigeria: A Case Study of the General Studies Curriculum

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Abstract

Liberal education is a product of the Western academy and is today most prominent in the USA, but in recent years has been described in various national contexts where it has seldom existed before. However, the spread of liberal education has been underexplored in some regions, such as sub-Saharan Africa, and empirical research is limited on how liberal education curricula are adapted in African contexts. In this qualitative case study, I explore the global, national, and local forces that have influenced an African liberal education program—the General Studies curriculum at the University of Nigeria Nsukka—over time. Analysis of primary and secondary textual sources indicates that at the global level the legacies of colonialism, dynamics of globalization, and agency of transnational partners and actors have influenced the character and evolution of General Studies in Nigeria since its inception.

Keywords: liberal education, general studies, curriculum, Africa, Nigeria

Introduction

Liberal education (LE), a model of collegiate learning that provides disciplinary breadth alongside undergraduates' primary fields of study (AAC&U, n.d.), is widely regarded as a product of the Western academy and remains most prominent in the USA (Godwin, 2013; Godwin & Altbach, 2016). However, in recent years scholars have noted the appearance of LE in diverse education systems around the world where more specialized curricula long dominated (Godwin, 2013; Marber & Araya, 2017; Peterson, 2012). This nascent body of scholarship, while exciting in its novelty, over-emphasizes LE in developed

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regions, such as East Asia (Godwin & Pickus, 2018; Lewis & Rupp, 2015) and Europe (Sklad et al., 2016; Wende; 2011), while underexploring curricula in developing and post-colonial contexts like sub-Saharan Africa. While LE curricula in North Africa have been addressed by researchers in tandem with programs in the Middle East (Al-Hendawi et al., 2019; Godwin, 2013), the literature on LE in sub-Saharan Africa is sparse and focused on individual programs and institutions in only a few countries such as Ghana (Grant, 2016) and South Africa (Cross & Adam, 2012). Thus, little remains known empirically about how LE has adapted to sub-Saharan African contexts.

In order to fill this gap in research, this study seeks to elucidate the forces that shaped a unique model of LE shared by all Nigerian universities—the General Studies (GS) curriculum (Nwosu, 2017)—as delivered at the university where it was first developed, the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN). Empirically exploring GS' embeddedness in global, national, and local influences and tensions represents an underdeveloped but promising avenue for understanding African LE in context. Importantly, this research is intended to provide an amendment to the dearth of attention heretofore paid to sub-Saharan Africa in the global LE literature. GS is uniquely well positioned to serve as an exemplar of the underexplored impacts and manifestations of LE in Africa as it has existed and adapted for more than half a century at UNN (Nwosu, 2017a) and in the decades since has defused across Nigeria's entire national system of higher education (Ogbeide, 2018).

Theoretical Framework

This research is concerned with the imbricated and disjunctive spatial and cultural dimensions—from the global to the local—of the worldwide LE phenomenon, as manifested at UNN. Consequently, I adapt Marginson and Rhoades (2002) "Glonacal" Perspective on change in higher education (HE) in a globalizing world. Glonacality—shorthand for global, national, and local—stresses that practices and frameworks, including curricula, employed by HE institutions are regulated by forces that arise and interact simultaneously at each of these "three intersecting planes of existence" (p. 282). Therefore, I

conceptualize GS as situated at the nexus of global, national, and local forces that must be clarified to contextualize the curriculum's unique approach to LE in Nigeria. Through this theoretical lens, I address the following research question: What are the forces (global, national, and local) that have influenced GS at UNN overtime?

Research Design

I chose a qualitative case study for my research design because my project is concerned with the particularities of a specific entity—GS at UNN—and its overlapping and blurred contextual conditions (Yin, 2011). This case study draws upon three triangulated data sources to strengthen the rigor of this qualitative inquiry (Creswell & Miller, 2000). First, I analyzed primary textual sources (university course catalogs, student handbooks, and curricular artifacts such as inventories of seminar topics and teaching materials) that describe various iterations of the GS curriculum over time. Second, I analyzed secondary written sources documenting the history of GS, including manuscripts (Nwosu, 2017a; Pettit, 1969), past graduate student research (Ezeocha, 1977), book chapters (Okonkwo, 1986), and conference proceedings (Nwosu, 2017b; Oluikpe, 1984, 1987). Third, I am in the process of conducting semi-structured qualitative interviews with GS faculty at UNN to put my findings in the practical context of contemporary curricular work in Nigeria. Archival research conducted on-site at both UNN and Michigan State University (MSU) in 2019 yielded the primary and secondary texts that I analyzed through a process of “pattern-matching” to organize findings from the data according to the global-national-local scheme of the glonacal perspective (Yin, 2011, p. 16). Follow-up interviews are planned for Fall 2020 in order to allow faculty, as subject-matter experts and “curricular change agents” (Hill, 2019, p. 13), to “member check” (Creswell & Miller, 2000) my preliminary findings and offer fresh insights on the curriculum as they experience it. Due to constraints on travel from COVID-19, these collaborative conversations are being conducted remotely through online platforms.

Preliminary Findings

In this 'Research-in-Progress' report, I focus on forces that articulate at the global level of my theoretical framework. While space is limited here, it should be noted that these global forces overlap and interact with forces at the national (Nigerian) and local (institutional) levels in ways unique to UNN's context, and have manifested in GS in different ways over the six decades since the curriculum's establishment in 1961. Textual analysis of primary and secondary sources indicates three global forces that influenced GS since its establishment at UNN in 1961—colonialism, globalization, and transnational mobility and partnerships. The analytical and practical power of these global-level findings lies not merely in their identification—perhaps not acutely revelatory in the era of globalization—but in situating them in UNN's unique national, institutional, and historical context to highlight how LE has been adapted in an African curriculum in practice.

Colonialism

Colonialism, or “the establishment by more developed countries of formal political authority over [less developed] areas” (Scott, 2014, p. 97) was imposed over Nigeria by the British Empire from the 19th through the mid-20th centuries (Central Intelligence Agency, 2018). This century-long period of foreign subjugation provided the original impetus for founding both a new university in Nigeria (UNN) as well as introducing a LE curriculum (GS). The British Empire had imposed a vocationally-oriented and highly specialized model of tertiary curricula in its West African colonies (Lilford, 2012; Osunde, 1985). It was dissatisfaction with specialized, colonial education among UNN's founding generation that instigated the adoption and adaptation of LE, that would subsequently diffuse to other Nigerian universities in the form of GS (Ezeocha, 1977).

Globalization

Since Nigeria's national independence, the forces of globalization, stemming from ever greater political, economic, technological, and cultural global interconnectedness (Altbach & Knight, 2007), have had an ongoing influence on GS at UNN. Responses to globalization include innovating and adapting

transnational education models (i.e. LE), disciplines, content areas, and modes of teaching and learning (Nwosu, 2017a). In the globalized HE sector, UNN, along with its School of General Studies (SGS), strives to position itself as a globally competitive institution (University of Nigeria Nsukka, 2019).

Transnational Mobility & Partnerships

Mobility of individuals across national borders and systems of HE and collaborations with foreign organizations have long impacted GS at UNN. The experiences of UNN's principal founder, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe, as a student in the United States helped to inspire him to found UNN and to experiment with LE (Poloma & Szelenyi, 2019; University of Nigeria Nsukka, 2012). Later in the 1960s, collaborations with foreign advisors (from America and Europe) and partnerships with foreign institutions (including MSU) shaped the early form of GS (Ezeocha, 1977; Pettit, 1969). Today, most of the SGS' faculty are Nigerians educated in Nigeria, but international collaborations continue to influence GS (University of Nigeria, 2012, 2019).

Contributions to the Field of Comparative and International Higher Education

In addition to significantly underscoring the underexplored context of sub-Saharan Africa, my research also challenges assumptions of the extant literature on global LE. The consensus among scholars focused on LE in other non-USA contexts has heretofore been that "liberal education's development remains a phenomenon occurring on the periphery of—without a great deal of influence on—mainstream... higher education" in most countries (Godwin, 2013, p. 233). This is not the case with GS, which has achieved ubiquity within "mainstream" HE in Nigeria since its inception at UNN in 1961 (Nweke & Nwoye, 2016). As a national curriculum, Nigeria's GS challenges the overt American-centrism present in the LE literature that assumes the USA is LE's natural "home" (Godwin, 2015, p. 227).

Second, this research also makes an important theoretical contribution in its application of the "glonacal" perspective (Marginson & Rhoades, 2002). Previous studies that have employed the concept of "glonacality" have primarily examined matters of administration, policy, and leader decision-making

in HE (Cantwell & Maldonado-Maldonado, 2009; Marginson & Sawir, 2005). By focusing on curricular issues and transformations instead, my project extends the utility of the glonacality in a way that is replicable by other education researchers working on curricula in different international contexts.

Author Note

Robert Cermak is currently a PhD Candidate at Michigan State University. He has worked in higher education administration at the University of Michigan and Michigan State University. Robert's research interests include curriculum development, faculty sensemaking and agency, and international and comparative higher education. This research was supported in part by funding from the College of Education and the Graduate School at Michigan State University.

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