

General Studies Programme and Civic Education: An Examination of Nigeria's Experience

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Abstract

Civic education is a critical part of general education in societies. It facilitates political participation which is a prerequisite for a progressive democratic society. Nations of the world adopt strategies in educational policies to reflect this purpose which ultimately affect national development. General Studies Programme (GSP) is such a strategy adopted by the Nigerian government through the university system to broaden the scope of undergraduates to imbibe the spirit of responsiveness, mutual understanding and patriotism. This paper aimed at examining the degree of success of the programme in enhancing civic education with its resultant effect on the electoral process. Government and operators of the GSP will find results of this study useful in refocusing on areas which will enhance achievement of its set objectives. A combined qualitative and quantitative methodology was adopted to analyse the secondary data got on the 2011 and 2015 Presidential election results in Nigeria. It was found that total no. of votes cast dropped by about 25% in 2015 compared to 2011. Voter turn-out during the same period also dropped by 10%. This means that expected positive impact of GSP on civic education leading to political participation has not been realized. It could be as a result of deficiencies on individual or collective basis. The study recommended that the GSP should be given more breadth and depth, citizens should be more broad-minded and government should expand the coverage of Tertiary Education Trust Fund to all universities involved in this programme.

Key words: *Civic Education, General Studies Programme, Political Participation, Voter Turn-Out, Presidential Election and Tertiary Education Trust Fund.*

Introduction

Education is an instrument adopted by nations of the world to direct human resource along an appropriate path to achieve productive and growing societies (Felleke, 2005). It therefore behooves on countries with the goal of development to devise strategies to utilize education to its advantage. The process of implementing such identified strategies varies from nation to nation. An early and appropriate investment in education is an effective mobilizer of developmental potentials in a country bearing in mind that as education derives inspiration from society, it also reciprocally contributes to societal growth and development (Nweke and Nwoye, 2016).

Civic education, a subset of general education entails political involvement, giving awareness and building capacity to encourage participation of citizens of a nation in governance (CETA, 2010). It engages all citizens, enhances leadership potentials and encourages democratic practice. It brings into focus citizenship rights and obligations as well as issues of overall development of the nation.

Nigerian universities (Federal, State and Privately owned), are all uniformly monitored along the same identified standards by the National Universities Commission (NUC). This Commission sets out benchmark of standards which must be complied with by universities and with its periodic accreditation checks, defaulting institutions are penalized.

In the Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) issued by the NUC in 1989 to Nigerian universities, the General Studies Programme (GSP) was introduced. It later had the addition of Entrepreneurship studies to the programme in 2002. MAS was later reviewed by NUC to become Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) in 2007.

General Studies Programme (GSP) in Nigeria is an aspect of the educational policy of the country covering a set of identified courses to be of general applicability to undergraduates of universities in Nigeria beyond their normal respective disciplines. The overall aim is to broaden the scope of all students and harness such acquired knowledge to impact positively the development of the country. The relationship of this Programme and Civic education in Nigeria is the subject to be examined in this paper.

Statement of the Problem

A scholar is a researcher who either has a problem to solve or ceases to bear such a name (Greer, 1969). The problem is to identify a gap which may exist between a desired goal and an achieved stage so as to contribute to knowledge. The independent variable in this study is General Studies Programme (GSP) while the Dependent variable is Civic Education in Nigeria.

Nigeria, a plural society said to have been artificially created by “historical accident in 1914” by the British, is a collectivity of divergences in terms of language, ethnicity, culture etc (Osaghae, 1990:596). Concerted efforts have been made by successive governments to ameliorate the negatives of these diversities including policies of Federalism, Unity School System, Quota System/Federal Character Principle and the National Youth Service Scheme. The introduction of General Studies Programme (GSP) in Nigerian universities is yet another policy to foster the unity of this country through enhanced civic education amongst other channels. This has been in operation since 1989. How well can it be said to have achieved this goal?

This paper therefore examines the impact of the General Studies Programme in Nigerian universities on the enhancement of Civic education which is aimed at achieving the national development of this country.

Objectives of Study

The general objective of this paper is to examine the effect of the operation of GSP on the dependent variable, civic education in Nigeria. Additionally, it seeks to do the following:

- a. Examine the extent of adoption of the GSP by Nigerian universities;
- b. Examine the degree of update the programme has witnessed since introduction; and
- c. Determine the impact on civic education as manifested in Voter Turn-out in 2011 and 2015 Presidential election results in Nigeria.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Scholars have opined in different forms on the relevance of education as a factor that enhances the fast-paced process of modernization of societies (Felleke, 2005). It is seen as an investment a nation undertakes which surely yields positive dividends in the future. The alternative is to dwell in ignorance and reap the negative results as well. To accomplish the success story, countries regularly review the machinery of extending this training in its institutions of learning to accomplish the desired societal progress. As posited by Felleke

(2005), two clear forms of education can be identified, namely, “Education for literacy (education widening) and Education for advancement (education deepening)”. The former merely takes the beneficiary out of the cycle of ignorance but the latter goes further to utilize it as a spring board to achieving national development.

Civic education which is a subset of education enhances democracy in societies with clearly identified rights and duties of members of society aimed at national development. This is to ensure that the people participate in governance.

As identified by Almond and Verba (2015), while there exists three defined types of political culture which are “Parochial, Subject and Participant”, it is the Participant type that is encouraged in democratic settings. In Parochial political culture, citizens are not aware of what transpires outside their immediate domain. They are ignorant of both inputs and outputs of the political system. In Subject political culture, citizens are aware of the outputs of the system but not interested in contributing. In Participant political culture however, citizens are aware of both inputs and outputs of the political system and are willing to participate. This is the type which a progressive society desires.

A significant aspect of civic education is manifested in voter education leading to political participation. This is to support the nation’s electoral process by both the central electoral agency and other groupings including institutions through the programmes they offer. Voting is a key medium of propagating democracy which perpetuates freedom of choice, free, fair and credible elections, maintenance of sovereignty of the people and securing the responsibility/accountability of representatives. This will foster national development which portrays the ability to make qualitative life available to the nation’s citizens.

Civic education will bring up citizens of positive behavior as they respond to situations that will be of advantage to themselves and society. On the contrary, failure in propagating civic education would raise citizens of negative behavior that will be injurious to themselves and society in different forms including perpetrating vices (CETA, 2010).

General Studies Programme in tertiary institutions is not peculiar to Nigeria. Since it entails broadening the thinking scope of students beyond the immediate disciplines, which will be useful to them and society, many countries adopt the programme. Troy University in Alabama, United States of America (USA) for instance has the programme 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 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 society.

From the review, it is clear that GSP is part of the educational policy that can contribute towards national development in a democratic setting through the instrument of enhanced civic education. This supports Felleke’s (2005) argument of having education for advancement rather than that for mere literacy. Voter education is seen as instrumental to the outcome that is got from elections showing the degree of involvement of citizens in governance agreeing with Almond and Verba’s (2015) Participant political culture.

However, has this been proven right in the Nigerian case or not? This is the gap to be filled.

Communication theory is relevant in this subject. Communication can be taken as a process whereby human beings relate to one another with the purpose of transferring meaning. Lasswell (1971) views communication as a process involving “who says what, to whom, in what channel and with what effect?” This is commonly referred to as ‘the Dance model of

communication'. Lasswell, a renowned scholar is respected to date for his stipulative definition of politics as a study of the process of "who gets what, how and why?". In the same manner, he has captured the full ramifications of the concept of communication.

This process covers the Communicant, the Message, the Channel and the Recipient. This theory is relevant to this study in that GSP is taught by the lecturer (Communicant), the message is the content of the set of courses, the channel is the mode of delivery and the recipients are the students. How well the purpose of this process is achieved is the subject of this paper. This is what Lasswell sees as 'with what effect' in the latter part of his definition of communication.

Methodology

The methodology adopted in this paper is mainly qualitative. Secondary data got from textbooks, journals, magazines, newspapers and internet is used in the examination of GSP and Civic education in Nigeria. Some descriptive statistics are however used in the tabular presentation of some secondary data to show variation in values which makes it slightly quantitative as well.

The Discourse

The National Universities Commission (NUC) as per Decree/Act 16 of 1985 which was amended as Decree/Act 48 of 1988 is authorized as the regulator of university education in Nigeria to standardize programmes offered by them in line with prescribed minimum academic standards. In 1989, the Minimum Academic Standards (MAS) document was put in place and it became a basis for accreditation of universities. This was when the General Studies Programme was instituted. In 2002, the Entrepreneurship course was added to the programme (Okojie, 2011). This is to broaden the scope of the GST Programme to incorporate teaching how skills can be acquired for "self-sustenance and reliance of eventual graduates of universities" and be of benefit to the country (Ekong and Williams, 2006).

MAS which was revised as BMAS (Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards) for Nigerian universities in 2007 reconfirmed the salience of the GSP by even adding the course on Peace studies and Conflict resolution. According to the 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*".

The main goal of the GSP is to produce morally and intellectually capable graduates with vision and entrepreneurship skills in a milieu of peace and social cohesiveness.

The objectives of the Programme are as follows:

1. Acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value-orientation for the survival of the individual and society;
2. Development of intellectual capacities of individuals to understand, appreciate and promote peaceful co-existence;
3. Production of graduates with broad knowledge of the Nigerian nation and people with a view to inculcating in them mutual understanding and patriotism;
4. Exposing graduates of Nigerian universities to the rudiments of ICT for computer literacy and ability to live usefully in this ICT age;
5. Preparing students for a post-university life with opportunities for job creation and entrepreneurial skills; and
6. Production of graduates capable of communicating effectively, both oral and written (NUC, 2007).

To propagate this programme, NUC identified the following courses as its constituents:

- a. Communication in English
- b. Logic, Philosophy and Human Existence
- c. Nigerian peoples and culture
- d. Use of library, study skills and ICT
- e. Communication in French/Arabic
- f. History and philosophy of Science
- g. Peace studies and Conflict resolution
- h. Introduction to Entrepreneurial skills/studies

The purpose of the establishment of GSP is also in conformity with the goals of tertiary education in Nigeria which are as follows:

1. To contribute to national development through manpower training;
2. Develop proper values for survival of individuals and society;
3. Develop intellectual capacity to appreciate local/international milieus;
4. Acquire skills to be self-reliant and useful in community
5. Promote national unity; and
6. Promote national/international relationship (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2005).

To the extent that NUC is the regulatory body set up by government to ensure a standardized educational platform for all universities in Nigeria, no university can ignore its mandate. Currently, the number of universities in Nigeria is taken as 143 comprising 40 federal, 42 State and 61 private universities (Premium Times, 2017). To maintain a uniform standard of education in the country, all universities, not minding the ownership obey NUC's instructions. Default attracts withdrawn accreditation which may even lead to closure.

Since 1989 when the GSP was introduced into the university system, there have been updates. By 2002, there was the addition of the Entrepreneurship course to encourage entrepreneurial skill acquisition and reduce the incidence of graduate unemployment. As per NUC's guideline (NUC, 2007), Peace studies and conflict resolution course had also been incorporated signifying the importance attached to both domestic and international peace maintenance.

The impact that has been made by the General Studies Programme on Civic Education will be examined from the data got from the 2011 and 2015 Presidential elections in Nigeria. This is to assess if the acquisition of the GSP knowledge since 1989 has been of any significant impact on political participation of Nigerians from the standpoint of the election results in the two years. This is in line with the expectations of the GSP as enumerated in its objectives.

As per information provided by the Centre for Public Policy Alternatives (CPPA, 2015), data from 2011 and 2015 Presidential election results in Nigeria are as follows:

In 2011,

Registered voters: 72,611,070

Total votes cast: 38,209,978

No. of political parties involved: 20

Voter Turn-out (Total votes cast/Total registered voters): 54%

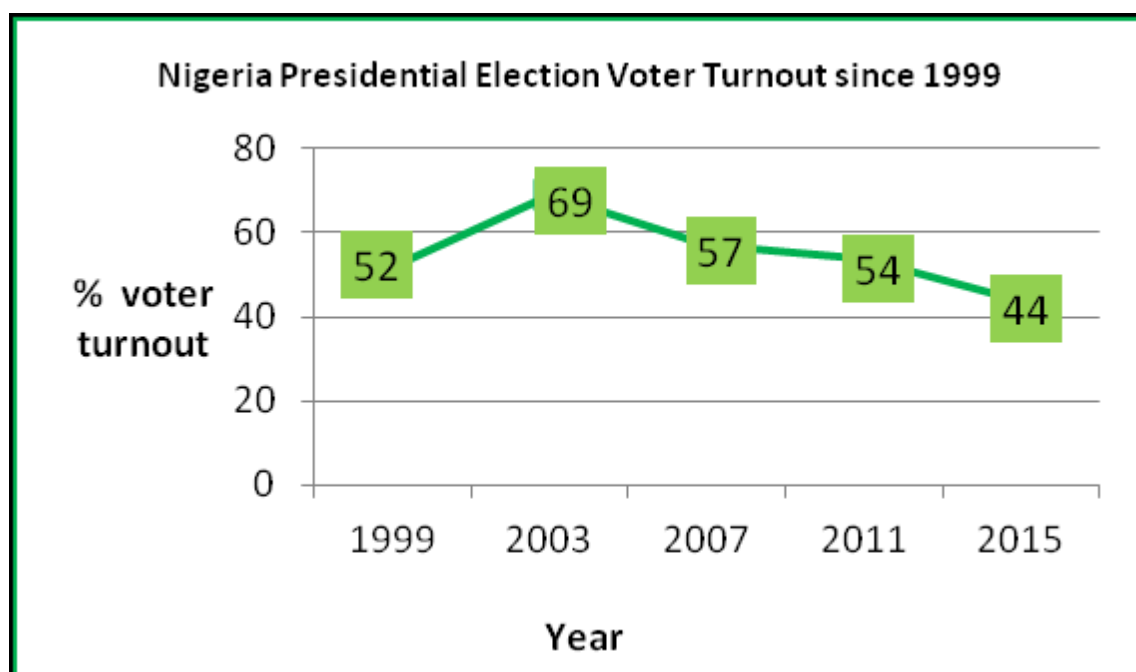
In 2015,

Registered voters: 67,422,005

Total votes cast: 29,432,083

No. of political parties involved: 14

Voter Turn-out (Total votes cast/Total registered voters): 43.65% (CPPA, 2015).



Source: The Centre for Public Policy Alternatives, 2015.

NIGERIA'S	PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS	REGIONAL TURN-OUT	VOTER
	2015 (%)	2011 (Approx.)	(%)
North Central	43.47	49	
North East	45.22	56	
North West	55.09	56	
South East	40.52	63	
South South	57.81	62	
South West	40.26	32	

Source: The Centre for Public Policy Alternatives, 2015.

The data from CPPA further revealed that since 1999, the Presidential elections voter turn-out has dropped from 52% in 1999 to 43.65% in 2015. The reduction of Total number of votes cast in 2015, compared with 2011 is about 25%. Regional distribution of voter turn-out in the elections also shows reduction in 2015 (compared with 2011) except for Southwest alone that recorded an increase from 32% to 40%.

Furthermore, there are increasing incidences of inter-ethnic rivalries in different parts of the country. The crises in Southern Kaduna and the renewed clashes of Modakeke/Ife people of 2016 are cases in point.

How well then has this GSP delivered at the highest level of academic pursuit, the university, which is expected to speculate downwards to the different segments of the society achieved its goal?

Discussion of Findings

From the objectives of the GSP, it is obvious that that four of the six are directly aimed at

influencing civic education in Nigeria and they are:

1. Acquisition, development and inculcation of the proper value-orientation for the survival of the individual and society;
2. Development of intellectual capacities of individuals to understand, appreciate and promote peaceful co-existence;
3. Production of graduates with broad knowledge of the Nigerian nation and people with a view to inculcating in them mutual understanding and patriotism; and
4. Preparing students for a post-university life with opportunities for job creation and entrepreneurial skills.

The remaining two which are indirectly related but still contribute to expected national development of the country are as follows:

1. Exposing graduates of Nigerian universities to the rudiments of ICT for computer literacy and ability to live usefully in this ICT age; and
2. Production of graduates capable of communicating effectively, both oral and written.

Some of the courses on the programme including Logic, philosophy and human existence, Nigerian peoples and culture, History and philosophy of science, Peace studies and conflict resolution and Introduction to entrepreneurial skills are of positive relevance to civic education. The courses are also within the bracket of the goals of tertiary education in Nigeria.

There is however a sectional treatment noted in the part-financing of universities in Nigeria through Tertiary Education Trust Fund, TETFUND. As per TETFUND Act 2011, 2% tax on profit of all registered companies in Nigeria is collected and only administered to government-owned university (Federal/State) neglecting the Private. This is not equitable as they are all expected to propagate this laudable policy.

From the data on the 2011 and 2015 Presidential election results, it is shown that the number of registered voters dropped from 72million in 2011 to 67million in 2015, political parties that fielded presidential candidates dropped from 20 in 2011 to 14 in 2015, Voter turn-out dropped from 54% in 2011 to 43.65% in 2015. These indices portray that there has not been corresponding enhancement in political participation as expected from increased civic education arising from the General Studies Programme.

Conclusion

It is clear from this paper that education for advancement is what Nigeria desires. The GSP is also seen as a veritable instrument in this process of national development. This can best be manifested in a plural society like Nigeria by having programmes that encourage integration and participation of most citizens in the enhancement of democratic practice, devoid of rancor and distractions.

It is also obvious that in a democratic system, these expectations can only be realized through the ballot box and confidence in the electoral mechanism through voting which is the required signal for progress.

From the data given, this degree of comfort to ascertain the positive effect of the GSP has not been achieved. This is further substantiated by Lasswell's theory of communication attributing success of the whole communication process to the effect recorded at the end of the sequence.

In complying with the objectives of this study, the adoption of the GSP programme can be

said to be broad-based but may be not all the first two year level students are exposed to it. Update of the programme can be said to be regularly carried out by NUC as seen with the inclusion of Entrepreneurial as well as Peace and conflict courses. The impact of the GSP on civic education however is that which is not significant.

This means there are some anomalies or deficiencies which have to be corrected for there to be progress. These deficiencies could be individual or collective which has bearing on government's effort at creating sufficient awareness. It could be that the teaching is not thorough enough with necessary practical aids or they are not made compulsory for all first and second year students as required. It could also be as a result of financial constraints on some universities to prosecute the programme adequately.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusion above, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. All first and second year students in all Nigerian universities should be taught GSP courses in full compliance with NUC's requirements;
2. The lectures should be down-to-earth so as to make them true to life focused on the achievement of the six objectives of the GSP. This will lead to productive thinking on the part of the beneficiaries;
3. Citizens should learn not to view all tasks on a zero-sum basis (winner takes all) in their daily engagements with other members of society;
4. Federal government, through the National Orientation Agency, NOA, should intensify the awareness campaign to citizens on the objectives of the GSP; and
5. Federal government should ensure a level-playing field for all Nigerian universities propagating the GSP by allowing them access to TETFUND.

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