

Mass Media As Tool For Promoting General Studies Programme In University Education: The University Of Nigeria, Nsukka Perspective

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Abstract

The focus of this paper is on media strategies to promote General Studies Programme in University Education. The paper examines the concept and growth of the programme since its inception in University Education in Nigeria and stresses the need for media intervention for the promotion of the programme. Thus, it identifies and showcases the imperatives to promote General Studies Programme such as the rapid growth of students and staff population; the need to march this growth with commensurate infrastructural facilities, the negative attitudes of University Administration and students towards the programme and the need for consumers of the programme and the public to make inputs and the desire to attract external assistance for the upliftment of the programme quality. Thus, the paper suggests proactive media strategies for promoting the programme such as news releases/conferences, media charts, seminar/workshops, using media outlets to seek external assistance and establishment of print medium outfit like 'General Studies News'.

Introduction

General Studies Programme (GSP) in tertiary institutions in Nigeria is the brainchild of the University of Nigeria, Nsukka. It is a programme designed to provide an intellectual meeting point for all disciplines, expand the intellectual horizon of students and therefore provide broad-based, people-oriented and self-reliant education. Prior to the establishment of the University on October 7, 1960 the colonial education was not adequate enough to put Nigeria on the right pedestal for development. According to Azikiwe as noted in Ijomah(1986), what was dubbed the 'colonial mentality was only possible because the colonial education imprisoned the African intellectual potentialities and denied them avenues for meaningful expression.'

After the initial criticism, the programme had since been embraced not only by every tertiary institution, but also attracted recognition by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Oluikpe in Iffih (1998:12) said that following the directive from the then Head of State, General Olusegun Obasanjo on October 22, 1977 General Studies Programme was made compulsory in all tertiary institutions.

However, in recent time, the programme is facing many challenges which call for the attention of the media. These challenges include high population growth of

students and staff, inadequate office and classroom accommodation, inadequate internet facilities as well as negative perceptions of the students, University Administration, the government and the public.

The media through selective reporting determine what the public sees and thinks at any point in time (Pate, 2012:61). They usually direct our mind on what to think. Thus, the media by focusing repeated emphasis on the challenges are likely to attract external attention for the upliftment of the programme quality, and also, possibly change the negative perceptions towards the programme. In view of this, the paper suggests media strategies for the promotion of the programme like awareness creation, news releases/conferences and establishment of a print medium outfit like 'General Studies News.'

The Evolution of General Studies Programme

Prior to 1960, University of Ibadan, the only existing University in Nigeria then operated as a University College. As an affiliate of University of London, it had no powers to award degree. The college adopted a single-track educational system along with other European Universities where a student admitted to study religion for instance, is taught only religion throughout the duration of his/her study without recourse to basic knowledge of what obtains in other academic disciplines. Such narrow education system as noted in the International Bank Mission Report could not put Nigeria on the right direction for development (cited in Ijomah, 1986).

When the Inter-university Council for Higher education Overseas (now University Council for Higher education Overseas) and the International Cooperation Administration (now the United States of America Agency for International Department) were invited for programme recommendation, both agreed and recommended that the University should address itself to the problems of Nigeria and indeed of emergent nation. In other words, the solution to the nation's problems may lie in the introduction of a programme that, according to Iffih (1980) 'would provide intellectual meeting point for all disciplines; a programme that inculcates in the students a broad based education which widens the students intellectual horizons and endows candidates with necessary potentialities for effective functional citizenship'.

The process for actualizing the programme was set in motion with the inauguration of a planning committee charged with the responsibility. Fafunwa (1984) in Iffih (1998:4) summarized the **philosophy** that guided the early planners of the programme. Thus:

- i. 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
- ii. Such a belief system cannot be articulated without the ability to handle language effectively
- iii. One can distinguish three dimensions of belief system – those concerned with the social world in which man lives and which lives in each man; the natural world which forms mans physical environment and of which his body is composed; and the world of value as it is expressed in religion, literature, art and philosophy.

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

Based on this philosophy, the courses in the programme were originally grouped into four course units namely: The Use of English, Social Sciences, Natural sciences and Humanities.

With the approval of this report, the launching of the General studies Programme in the 19961 – 62 session marked a significant development in university education in Nigeria. The programme has not only been embraced by other tertiary institutions, it attracted recognition by the Federal Government of Nigeria. Oluikpe in Iffih (1998:12) stated that following the directive from the then Head of state, General Olusegun Obasanjo on October 22, 1977, General Studies Programme was made compulsory in all universities.

Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on agenda – setting theory of the press. Literarily, agenda refers to list of issues to be considered or acted upon. Agenda – setting theory originated from the idea of Lippman (1922) who stated that the media help to put pictures in our heads implying that the media professionals always have something they want to emphasize as newsworthy. However, McCombs and Shaw (1932) posited that the media tell us not what to think but what to think about. According to them, members of the audience not only learn about public issues through the media, they also learn how much importance to attach to an issue or topic from the emphasis the mass media place upon it.

Corroborating this view, Severin and Tankard (2001:230-231) note that the agenda-setting function is the capability of the mass media to select and emphasize issues to be perceived as important by the public and through repeated news coverage, the media raise the importance of such issue.

Also, Rodman (2010) notes that the important point to make about agenda-setting is that once issues capture peoples attention, they have a tendency to influence government policy. For instance, earlier in 2010 media like CNN, Aljazeera, and Sky News, using video clips emphasized the human right abuses, killings and torture of armless civilians in Libya. This attracted the attention of UN Security Council decision to use all necessary measures to protect civilians against incessant assault by President Gadaffi's forces in Libya. In the same vein, because the media have the ability to highlight and emphasize issues and variables necessary for the growth of GSP, they can cause the government, the public and University administration to perceive the variables as essential in the growth of GSP. Such variables include the challenges, the needs of GSP and the strategies for promoting the programme. The media could do this by constant stream of messages through frequent reportage, coverage or expositions of news and issues that positively affect General Studies Programme. Media emphasis will likely attract assistance from philanthropic organisations, the government and University administration. Assistance could be in the form of cash, or materials such as books, teaching aids and ICT equipments.

Imperatives for the Promotion of General Studies Programme (GSP).

At this juncture, one may pause to question the rationale for promoting General Studies Programme in University education system. Today the programme is faced with numerous challenges which call for the attention of the media. This is with a view to, not only repositioning the programme for effective teaching, learning and research, but also for sustainable growth of University education in Nigeria.

The relevance of mass media in overcoming these challenges is expressed in a conscious effort to package messages which will persuade, encourage and convince organisations, the public, consumers of the product and other stakeholders to participate in overcoming the challenges so as to enhance the quality of University education. We shall adopt two approaches to explain the need for the promotion of General Studies Programme. One approach is from the perspective of media relation while the second approach is what the writer refers to as 'situational approach'.

Media Relations Approach

The media role of promoting any programme like the General Studies Programme could be built into the media relation function of the media. Media relation refers to efforts made to establish profitable relationship with media professionals and organisations. Media professionals include journalists, writers, broadcasters, columnists, script writers, producers, publishers etc. Rodman (2010) refers to media relation as the practice of developing and maintaining contact with reporters.

One major visible aspect of media relation process is effective communication, that is, the creation and distribution of messages designed to meet the goals and objectives of an organisation. At the other end, the media relation's largest preoccupation is by far, gaining the good will of the public through favourable publicity (Rodman, 2010:348). According to Ofonry (1985) cited in Onabajo (2005), media relation represents the deliberate policy actions and varied communication with a view to winning and sustaining the confidence and goodwill of various sections of the mass media, thus removing or at least minimizing the chances of misrepresentation, distortion and misconceptions of programmes. In line with this view, Nwosu (1997) notes that organisations get involved in media relations because the mass media serve as a bridge between any organisation and its external publics. He went further to include the reasons organisations are involved in media relation. These are cited in Onabajo (2005:4) as follows:

- i. To build and maintain cordial relations between organisations and media houses;
- ii. To ensure that an organisation gets adequate positive publicity for its activities, products and services
- iii. To explain effectively, an organisations policies or actions in order not to be misunderstood by the media and the public.
- iv. To ensure a timely circulation of well-written news releases with adequate background information to encourage media usage

- v. To get close to the mass media so as to appreciate their problems and mode of operations as well as utilize their potentials in a mutual and profitable manner.

Situational Approach (Challenges)

The second approach (situational approach) to the explanation of the rationale to promote General Studies is based on the current state of the programme. It centres on the numerous challenges facing the programme. These challenges are discussed as follows:

Growth of Students, Staff and Poor Facilities

The rapid growth in students and staff population is not accompanied by commensurate growth in the infrastructural facilities. The General Studies Programme was launched in the 1961-62 session with students population of 905 and 90 academic staff (Ijomah, 1986:16). In the 2010/2011 academic session, the students population rose to 28,515 while the academic staff strength rose to over 1,584 (UNN Annual Statistics, 2010). Though there is little improvement in infrastructural facilities as new General Studies Building Complex was erected in the 1980s, the classrooms and lecture theatres, are grossly inadequate; there are broken chairs and desks; absence of teaching aids and inadequacy of learning facilities such as audio-visual aids, projectors, power point, public address systems, internet facilities; inadequate office accommodation(where two or three lecturers are compelled to occupy one office) and gross underfunding. These gross inadequacies have given rise to over-use of the existing facilities which is not healthy for the growth of the programme.

However, there is light at end of the tunnel as the current Vice-Chancellor of the University has embarked on massive reconstruction, refurbishing and rehabilitation of the General Studies Building.

Attitude of the University Administration and Departments Towards Examination Schedules.

General Studies examinations and lecture schedules are often covertly or overtly disrupted by the University Administration and Departments. Departments schedule lectures and examinations at the same period and in same venues where General Studies examinations are to be held. In some situations, on arrival, the examination venues are found to be under lock and key even when appropriate authority was duly informed. Such situation does not only affect the smooth conduct of examination, it causes untold hardship and loss of man hour to the lecturers and students.

Value System and Negative Perception of GSP.

General Studies Programme was introduced in a period (1960s) characterised by high positive values. This was the period when there was little or no desire to become billionaires overnight through advanced fee fraud (419) and cyber crimes popularly referred to as 'yahoo'; a period when bribery and corruption had not made in-road into societal and national development efforts; a period when educational career was in the front burner for genuine acquisition of knowledge and comfortable standard of living;

and a period when there was uprightness, respect for seniors, elders and constituted authorities.

All these have changed since the end of the Nigerian civil war in January, 1970. Apparently, vices have taken over and consequently this has had negative impacts on the students perceptions, conceptions, attitudes, views and approaches to the pursuit of academic programmes in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

General Studies Programme is not an exception. Students see the courses as not relevant to their disciplines, reasoning that the programme is mere academic requirement for the award of degree. The importance of this programme goes far beyond this misconception and therefore needs to be corrected, projected and promoted. Instances of such negative perceptions are reflected in the following negative attitudes like allocation of inadequate private study periods to General Studies courses by students; deliberately sitting for general studies examinations without formal registration of the courses; unwillingness and reluctance on the part of some students to ascertain their scores when results are published; and poor participation in lecture and seminar class discussions. Such attitudes invariably tend to reduce the standard of education.

Media as Tools for Promoting General Studies Programme

Media tools here refer to those media techniques used in public relation practices to attain set-objectives. Onabajo (2005:6), in this direction notes that the key to the success of every item of publicity is to attract attention, maintain interest, create desire, build conviction and prompt action. Akande (2003) underscores the importance of the media in promoting organisations programmes when he said that working without the media is like a fish thinking of survival outside the water. Ishika (2012:223) puts it succinctly when he said that if the media fail to give the right information to the people, the tendency is that the society may grop in the dark

The use of media strategies to promote the programme could enhance the role of General Studies in University Education as projected in this section. As posited by Kadiri (2012:127), one of the most important reasons for the use of Information Communication Technologies in the classroom is to better prepare the students for a workplace where computers, internet and related technologies are used at all times.

Use of Seminars and Workshops

Seminars, workshops and other Open House activities enable General Studies Programme to share and transmit knowledge and exhibit expertise on selected themes. These activities provide avenues for staff, students and the School of General Studies to showcase the products of the programme. These include amongst others, research works, exhibitions (arts and books) and progress made in areas of teaching, learning and research

Publicity Materials: Establishment of General Studies News

Establishment of house journal to be called 'General Studies News' will aim at educating and acquainting the publics with the needs, development efforts and aspiration of General Studies Programme. It could be published monthly.

In addition, there are other forms of publicity materials for promoting shandbooks. Other tools are news conferences, talk shows and media charts.

Websites

A website will obviously improve the image of General Studies Programme particularly in this period of globalization when millions of people log on for information. This is likely to improve the image of the programme as it enables a two-way flow of messages which center on General Studies Programme.

Use of Direct Mail

Projects such as international conferences and celebration of Jubilees of General Studies Programme, require huge sums of money. It is possible to reach external bodies such as Alumni Associations, charitable and philanthropic organisations for assistance, using direct mail.

News Releases and Other Tools

News release is a short document written in standard news form that contains the information needed to write a news report (Rodman, 2010:253). Also, it is organisations news story written in a journalistic style (Onobojo, 2005:1). They can be used to publicize any issue in General Studies that is likely to attract media attention such as break-through, awards, honours or staff promotions.

Establishment of Public Relation Unit

There is need to establish Public Relation arm in the School of General Studies which will Liaise with other disciplines and Information Department of the University. Through this link, information on General Studies projects, innovations, changes and activities are transmitted immediately to relevant bodies who may need the information.

Summary and Conclusion

Though the General Studies Programme has been in the University curricula for almost 52 years, the development of the programme has been marred by inconsistency in the programme implementation coupled with rapid growth of students and staff population, and negative perceptions by students, University Administration and the public. This underscores the need to adopt media tools such as seminars, workshops, websites and news releases to promote the programme so as to reposition the programme for more meaningful University education.

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