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Deepening Citizens' Right and Access to Competitive Higher Education in Nigeria: Research-informed Teaching in Perspective

Abstract

International law obligates States to recognize the right of citizens to education and that they should make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity. This obligation reinforces the significant place of education in shaping and transforming the community. Education can redefine economic, cultural and social connections. However, the right to higher education in a globalised world goes beyond merely creating access to education; it entails providing a competitive one that meets the challenges of the 21st century. This is, therefore, a necessary ingredient to fulfilling this obligation of States. That is, a State's failure to meet this obligation is a deprivation of their citizens' right to higher education. Forward-minded countries have progressively adopted measures to deepen the access of their citizens to cutting-edge higher education. At the heart of this is a strategic shift from traditional educational delivery approaches to research-informed teaching – the practice of integrating research with teaching in higher education. But Nigeria, just like other developing countries, have not entrenched research-informed teaching within their higher education system and this has impeded the attainment of competitive higher education in the country. The paper examines the issue of research-informed teaching and its impact on Nigerian citizen's right and access to competitive higher education. The work employs qualitative research method to sample the views of participants on the chosen topic. The paper suggests that Nigeria should strategically incorporate research-informed teaching to deepen her citizens' right and access to competitive higher education.

Keywords: citizens' right, human right, access, competitive higher education, research-informed teaching

Introduction

Across the world, advanced States are continuously seeking measures to deepen the standard of education in their countries to ensure that their citizens enjoy meaningful access to education. This illustrates their keen awareness of the responsibility that attends their obligation under international law to recognize the rights of their citizens to education (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948). It is becoming increasingly accepted that the right to education entails access to competitive higher education that aligns with the demands of today's knowledge-based economy.

Approaches such as research-informed teaching are being employed by universities to strengthen the standard of higher education, the world over. These methods are proven to enhance students' capacity and employability. However, in developing countries such as Nigeria, they have not been very proactive, either in creating unique models that suit their local circumstances or successfully adopting

the workable templates of the advanced countries. Through evaluation of both primary and secondary data, interview of co-lecturers and the personal experiences of the authors, it is observed that research-informed teaching still does not form the core of Nigerian universities curricula.

The aim of this paper therefore is to evaluate the effectiveness of the current approach to delivering higher education in Nigeria in relation to research-informed teaching. It assesses how Nigeria can depart from the lackluster status quo and improve its system through the development and adoption of transformative higher education teaching and research methods. The paper suggests that Nigeria should strategically incorporate research-informed teaching to deepen her citizens' right and access to competitive higher education.

Understanding the nature of the right to higher education

International law, over the years, has consistently taken concerted steps to promote and protect the right of citizens to education. This is in recognition of the integral place of education to both national and international development. International law clearly recognizes the right to education as a human right of every one across the globe. According to Article 26 (1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), "Everyone has the right to education".

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), on its part, goes further to uphold the right of citizens to higher education. Article 28 of the Convention specifically requires States to:

Recognise the right of the child to education and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, and to...:

(c) Make higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity.

The global concern about promoting the right of citizens to education is hinged on the principle of best interest of the citizen and the State (Emejuru & Amadi, 2014, p. 8). No doubt, an educationally empowered citizen is in a better position to utilize his talent and potential for the betterment of the State.

Seeing the right to education as a human right is apposite because human rights are taken as legally enforceable claims against both the State and/or other persons. Human Rights are those rights which are so fundamental and form part of human existence without which life will be meaningless. These rights are fundamental and basic to the individual or group of individuals who assert them (Foster, 2008, pp. 5-7). Such rights are regarded as inalienable and fundamental to enjoyment of life and full human expression (Emejuru & Amadi, 2014, p. 8). They include the right to life, the right to property, right to fair hearing, freedom of expression, right to safe environment etc.

Human right upholds the basic dignity of the citizen as a human being, making him deserving of humane treatment (Emejuru & Amadi, 2014, p. 8). Although it cannot be argued that without right to education, life will be completely meaningless. But what can be said is that with full access to education by every citizen, and a competitive higher education at that, the right to life itself and other enshrined rights will find greater meaning, expression and utility. So the right to competitive higher education is rightly taken as forming a main component of human rights.

The universal declaration on human rights provides a universally agreed platform and standards to gauge each State's commitment to the respect and protection of the rights of their citizens. At the national level, globally acceptable standards of human rights have been incorporated into the *corpus juris* of most States, riding on the protocols and directive principles of international law (Steiner & Alston, 2007, p. 23). This reflects the commitment of national governments to respect and protect the rights of their citizens. In Nigeria, the fundamental human rights of Nigerians are enshrined in Chapter 4 of Nigeria's Constitution (1999, as amended).

The constitution is supreme; it is the *grundnorm* and it places premium on the human rights of Nigerian citizens. The mechanisms for upholding these rights are placed within the framework of the rule of law and respect for the right of individuals. Although the Nigerian constitution does not specifically outline the right to education as a human right, however, it can be stated that the country is bound by international Convention and Protocols to which it is a signatory. Therefore, the rights protected by those instruments are enforceable at the instance of citizens, in line with established procedures under international law.

Nevertheless, recognizing the significance of education both to the citizen and the State, Chapter 2 of the Nigerian Constitution (1999, as amended) which deals with fundamental objectives and directive principles of State policy, in section 18 states:

- (1) *Government shall direct its policy towards ensuring that there are equal and adequate educational opportunities at all levels*
- (2) *Government shall promote science and technology*
- (3) *Government shall strive to eradicate illiteracy; and to this end Government shall as and when practicable provide*
 - (a) *Free, compulsory and universal primary education;*
 - (b) *Free secondary education;*
 - (c) *Free university education; and*
 - (d) *Free adult literacy programme.*

It should be emphasized, however, that the right to higher education in a globalised world goes beyond merely creating access to education by States. It entails creating access to competitive and globalised education that can withstand the challenges of the 21st century. In other words, the non-provision of a competitive higher education by a State is a deprivation of the right of its citizens because anything short of quality education that enables citizen to compete globally does not amount to much. This lack of competitive education has been the situation of citizens of developing countries like Nigeria.

As a progressive step, the Nigerian State, without attempting to re-invent the wheel, can adopt measures already developed and entrenched by the forward-thinking States to deepen access to cutting-edge higher education in their countries, although tweaking it to suit its local circumstance. At the heart of measures adopted by progressive States across the world is a strategic shift from traditional educational delivery approaches to research-informed teaching.

What research informed teaching entails

Research-informed teaching is the practice whereby research is streamlined with teaching in higher education (Griffith, 2004; Healey, 2005). The concept is also

referred to as research-based practice in higher education or teaching as research (see University of North Carolina, 2019). The motivation behind the argument for research-informed teaching is the importance of mainstreaming the relationship between research and teaching; that is to promote closer links between the two to enhance best practices in teaching (Burgum & Stoakes, 2019). According to Brew (2001), "research-informed teaching is not just about pedagogic research or research into higher education; it is about the complex interplay of the core activities of higher education linked by their mutual relationships of learning".

The traditional practice globally is that most universities are organized into research and teaching divisions. Lecturers are then recruited to undertake both, whereas the course content revolves around the teacher's interest. But research-informed teaching seeks to further integrate both teaching and research, and making the student not only the focus but an integral part of the whole teaching process.

However, there appears to be no consensus as to what research-informed teaching actually entails, in terms of definition, and how it should be developed and delivered. It is argued that research-informed teaching is a "rather broad, all-encompassing term which covers a very diverse range of techniques" (Nicholson, 2017, p. 3). What can be said, however, is that there is a consensus on the overall aim of research-informed teaching to forge a closer link between teaching and research?

In recent times, there has been significant investment in developing research-informed teaching as the rightful alternative approach to enhancing competitive higher education outcomes such as student capacity and employability, staff awareness and institutions acceptability. In 2016, the UK government invested 26 million pounds into universities across the UK to reinforce research-informed teaching (Graham-Matheson, 2010).

Research-informed teaching could be achieved through various forms. The combined works of Griffith (2004), Healey (2005), and later, Healey and Jenkins (2014), highlight four distinct approaches to teaching that are generally taken as forming research-informed teaching (see also Centre for Teaching Excellence, 2019). These approaches are:

- Research-led teaching – This is primarily based on the traditional information transmission model where the faculty member simply shares the research outcome with students. Here, students are taught research findings in their field of study;
- Research-oriented teaching – The course content goes as far as highlighting the processes by which knowledge is produced. This way students learn the research processes as well as methodologies;
- Research-based teaching – This method helps students to learn as researchers. The course content is designed around inquiry-based, problem-based and project-based activities. It reduces the division between the teacher and students; and
- Research-tutored teaching – This method designs course content in a way that enable students to learn in small group discussions with the teacher dissecting research findings, and students writing papers or essays. Students learn through critique and discussion between themselves and staff.

Research-led and research-oriented methods are considered to be teacher-focused and that it emphasizes information dissemination; while research-based and research-tutored approaches are taken as student-focused; that it enhances students learning by doing (Nicholson, 2017, p. 3).

Nicholson (2017) and Healey (2005) emphasize the need to develop student-centered approaches to enhance students' employability. Nicholson (2017, p. 3) stated that "The most effective research-informed teaching methods must surely be those which best equip students with skills, understandings (or knowledge) and personal attributes that will make them more likely to gain employment and be successful in their profession". But it should be emphasized that the student cannot be empowered without heavy reliance on the subject knowledge of the teacher.

Therefore a combination of the four methods appear to offer the best learning outcomes, although they are most effective when tailored to the need of the particular discipline. The interest of the student should be the paramount yardstick of measurement because any approach that does not enhance students' employability could be considered not effective enough.

Accordingly, employability should be at the heart of Nigeria's higher educational system to enhance the quality of its products. There is the urgent need to upscale Nigeria's higher education to a global level through established approaches such as research-informed teaching. This is the better means by which the country can enhance the citizens' rights and access to competitive higher education.

Research methodology

The paper adopts a doctrinal and analytical approach, relying on qualitative and systematic investigation of primary and secondary data. It incorporates the personal experiences of the authors and co-lecturers at Nigerian universities which revealed that research-informed teaching approach has either not yet been introduced or deeply entrenched within the system. A questionnaire was administered and sample opinion taken. This is by no means conclusive, but it provides a fair idea of what is currently obtainable in Nigeria's higher educational system as regards research-informed teaching.

Analysis of research findings

From our study and the responses from the administered questionnaire, it is revealed that research-informed teaching approach has either not yet been introduced or deeply entrenched within Nigeria's higher education system. The responses confirm that structured, core research work only seems to take place during students' final year project, instead of advanced integration of research and teaching from first year to final year. This causes students grave difficulty seeing that they are only introduced to research in their final year. It is also observed that the course content that are given by the universities to lecturers are not always comprehensive as is obtainable in developed countries. Teaching is primarily carried out by way of information dissemination. Students are given assignments and essays, but these are not eminently structured and adequately supervised within determined research-informed teaching framework.

Benefits of research-informed teaching

From case studies conducted by several institutions, it has been discovered that research-informed teaching holds significant benefits in many respects for students, staff and higher institutions as a whole (Centre for Teaching Excellence, 2019). These benefits include:

- Better engagement and student satisfaction with the course
- Intellectual curiosity
- Students as learners and independent thinkers
- Research and communication skills
- Employability

In highlighting the diverse influences of research-informed teaching, case studies conducted by the University of Portsmouth and Nottingham Trent University assert that teaching students as co-researchers helps students' engagement within and beyond the formal curriculum, advancing knowledge and understanding, and on occasion contributing to the wider discipline (Walkington, 2015).

Research-informed teaching approach emphasizes focus on curriculum design, where students learn together with staff through joint activities and projects, and are supported by structured interventions throughout their course, from year one to final year project.

Considering the high competition in the labour market, employability skills are relevant and the totality of research based learning increases the employability of students as it enhances the skill of formulating questions, processing and monitoring research process which results in critical thinking and communication skills. It also fosters engagement which promotes team work and analytical skills. Students are able to use their initiative, self-manage themselves and sharpen their problem solving skills. All these skills are beneficial in the work place and so employers are on the lookout for them during recruitment processes.

Challenges

Despite the highlighted positive impacts and influences of research-informed teaching, the path to integrating it into the teaching system is riddled with challenges at various levels. A major challenge occurs where the faculty and institution do not provide the necessary support to drive the process. It is very difficult to succeed on a programme where the expected key drivers of the process do not fully buy into the concept, maybe through lack of appreciating what it entails.

Also, the number and diversity of students necessitating flexibility and adaptability poses another challenge (Burgum & Stoakes, 2019). This is particularly the case of Nigeria where the student-teacher ratio is very high. A situation where an average class in a public university could range above 100, overseeing a seamless integration of research-informed teaching could be daunting.

Then there is the problem of staff perceptions of their role and practicability of research-informed teaching. It could be quite confusing for staff to fully grasp what their role in the process entails because research-informed teaching disrupts the traditional process where research primarily flows from the research interest and prowess of the teacher.

Conclusion and recommendation

This paper examined the right and access of Nigerian citizens to competitive higher education and how it can be achieved through research-informed teaching. It argues that the right to education as guaranteed under international law is only truly enjoyed where citizens have access to competitive higher education that meets the challenges of a globalised world; it contends that, anything less amounts to a deprivation of the rights of citizens. It looked at how advanced countries are deepening the quality of their education through research-informed teaching to meet their educational objectives.

Having confirmed that research informed-teaching is not yet introduced as part, or forming the core, of Nigeria's higher education teaching approach, it is recommended that core research should be introduced from the first year of study instead of waiting to introduce students to research for the first time during their final year project. This will reduce the grave difficulty caused to students when they only encounter core research in their final year.

It is also recommended, in respect of legal education, that the Council of Legal Education, which is the supervisory body for legal training in Nigeria, should establish a Centre for Teaching Excellence to develop and coordinate research-informed teaching across law Faculties in Nigeria. This could be replicated by other professional bodies. It is believed that the cumulative effect of these measures will significantly impact on the employability of Nigerian students as well as enhance national development.

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