

KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION ON AFRICA THROUGH AFRICAN AND GENDER STUDIES CURRICULUM: BLACK/AFRICAN TERTIARY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND OUTCOMES IN A DEVELOPING CONTEXT (GHANA)

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Abstract

This paper seeks to improve the discourse on African Studies by taking a retrospection of an introductory course at a public tertiary institution in Ghana (West Africa). African Studies and Gender Studies are interdisciplinary academic fields that promote Africa-focused knowledge and gender perspectives. Students gain knowledge of African reality, become conscious of gender and Africa-related stereotypes, and are equipped to confront these preconceptions. This paper aims to investigate the course's outcomes and understand how students perceive African and Gender Studies curriculum. A qualitative research approach was adopted to gather data from 50 Black/African students at a public university who took a one-semester African Studies course during the 2022–2023 academic year. The data were subjected to thematic analysis. The study revealed that students were able to relate the course to themselves from Afrocentric and gender viewpoints which will enable them to contribute the knowledge and skills that they learned to the development agenda's goal towards a sustainable Africa. Moreover, it made it easier for them to connect with their peers since it taught them to treat everyone fairly and reject sexism. Students also benefitted from the course delivery methods such as group activities, multimedia, and art performances that provided room for greater idea exchange, engagement, discussion, and conceptual clarity. They ultimately provide students with the opportunity to gain practical knowledge about the African continent and the African people, and hence, there is a need for pedagogical modification that emphasizes practical components.

Keywords: Africa, Gender, Black/African, Curriculum

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Introduction

The teaching of African Studies has been a requisite part of public higher education in Ghana since the political independence era and continues to play a major role in the training of public university and public college graduates in the country in the 21st century. This curriculum initiative was spearheaded by the first Prime Minister and President of the Republic of Ghana, Osagyefo (“Redeemer” in the Akan language) Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, as a means of achieving national self-determination in Ghana and to contribute to the realisation of the Pan-African “educational visions” (Abraham, 2022, p. 20) that were spreading across the African continent and throughout the African world community during the 1960s (Frehiwot et al., 2022). It was Nkrumah’s vision that an African-centred, interdisciplinary higher education programme in African Studies would provide students with the opportunity to gain practical knowledge about the African continent and the African people. Such a programme would be an alternative to the colonialist, Eurasian vision of African Studies. In his book titled *I Speak of Freedom: A Statement of African Ideology* (1961), Nkrumah discussed the importance of African Studies in the context of African liberation and the decolonisation struggle. He argued that the African people must understand their history, culture, and heritage in order to assert their independence and sovereignty effectively.

In a visionary speech titled “The African Genius” that was delivered “on the occasion of the opening of the Institute of African Studies (IAS) at the University of Ghana, Legon, 25th October, 1963”, Nkrumah placed emphasis on the critical need to “study the history, culture and institutions, languages and arts of Ghana and of Africa in new *African-centred* [emphases added] ways” (Manuh and Sutherland-Addy, 2013, p. vii). Indeed, he was clear in his envisioning of African Studies in Ghanaian universities as a means of teaching and

learning more about Africa and about the global African Diaspora – vis-à-vis the study of the African continent as well as the inclusion of “a study of the origins and culture of peoples of African descent in the Americas and the Caribbean”. Contemporary scholars of African Studies also include African-descended people in Eurasia and the Pacific world as a part of the global African Diaspora (Rashidi, 2017; Manuh and Sutherland-Addy, 2013, p. vii; Palmer, 2000).

The audience (and later readers) of Nkrumah’s speech were prompted to ponder two of the more pressing questions that he posed to African intellectuals early on in “The African Genius”:

What sort of Institute of African Studies [and here we can include “Introduction to African Studies”] does Ghana want and need to have? In what way can Ghana make its own specific contribution to the advancement of knowledge about the peoples and cultures of Africa through past history and through contemporary problems?

For what kind of service are we preparing students of this Institute and of our [u]niversities? Are we sure that we have established here the best possible relationship between teachers and students? To what extent are our universities identified with the aspirations of Ghana and Africa? (Manuh and Sutherland-Addy, 2013, p. vi)

These kinds of self-reflexive questions point to the fact that teaching and learning about Africa can have a significant impact on the social and cultural development of Black/African students in Africa and in the global African Diaspora (Traoré, 2007). In addition to providing a counternarrative to Eurasian historical and contemporary biases about Africa and the African people,

African-centred approaches to African Studies can serve as catalysts for the sustainable development of Africa, not only via a rejection of anti-Black/African ideology, but as a source of vital indigenous information that can contribute to finding solutions to the contemporary African crisis of development (Asante, 2021; Frindéthié, 2010; Mkabela, 2005). Indeed, in his book titled *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-colonization* (1964/1970), Nkrumah delved into philosophical and ideological aspects of African Studies, particularly in the context of decolonisation. He emphasised the need for African intellectuals to develop a coherent African philosophy rooted in their own history and culture.

Understanding Africa and the African people both inside and outside the continent overlaps with the emphases that the African Studies and Gender Studies components of an “Introduction to African Studies” course recently offered at a new public university in a developing context placed on the concepts of interdisciplinarity, discipline, Afrotransdisciplinarity, Africologists, Africology, the Africological paradigm, Afrocentricity, gender, sex, biology, culture, patriarchal ideology, gender roles, stereotypes and prejudice, gender division of labour, gender socialisation, as well as gender equity and equality. Indeed, these are concepts that leading African Studies and Gender Studies scholars utilise in their teaching and research. Thus, the concepts were re-emphasised throughout the course in order to set the stage for ongoing lectures and discussions. Afrocentricity, “a mode of thought and action in which the centrality of African interests, values, and perspectives predominate”, in particular has played a critical role in the transformation of the negative and normative view of Africa as a place without a history until the arrival and subsequent invasion of Eurasian influences (Flannery, 2022; Asante, 2021; Kambon, 2017; Zulu, 2007; Mazama, 2003; Asante, 2003, p. 2).

During the first semester of the 2023 calendar year, an introductory course in African Studies was offered at a public university in Ghana (West Africa) by a team of African Studies and Gender Studies specialists who employed a multidisciplinary range of pedagogical approaches to help students gain a more comprehensive understanding of Africa. The introductory course encouraged students to challenge existing global knowledge in order to develop appropriate methodologies and theories for examining Africa through multidisciplinary approaches.

In the spirit of indigeneity, the African Studies content of the course was principally guided by an African-centred textbook that was specifically designed for undergraduate students. In the “Introduction” to *Africa in Contemporary Perspective: A Textbook for Undergraduate Students*, co-editors Takyiwaa Manuh and Esi Sutherland-Addy placed emphasis on the foundational importance of “African-centred perspectives in all aspects of the production and dissemination of knowledge” in the required “introductory, multidisciplinary course on Africa” in all public universities and public colleges in Ghana (Manuh and Sutherland-Addy, 2013, p. 1). In addition to lectures and tutorials covering “Gender Issues in Africa” and “Gender Equality and Empowering Women and Girls”, content from Molefi Kete Asante’s African-centred *History of Africa: The Quest for Eternal Harmony* (2019), particularly content that focused on the origins of humanity in Africa and classical African civilisations, was also central to the African Studies component of the course. Additional African-centred works by Cheikh Anta Diop (1985), Maulana Karenga (2010), and Manu Ampim (2003), for example, were put into conversation with content from the first episode of Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s *Africa’s Great Civilizations* (2017) documentary film

series, particularly the episode's focus on (a.) the origins of the first modern human beings in Africa before any other continent had modern human beings as well as (b.) Nile Valley and other classical African civilisations. Guided by the textbook that was edited by Manuh and Sutherland-Addy, the lectures and tutorials for the course also explored the following selected topics from the textbook's themes via African-centred lenses: "Cultural, Social & Political Institutions"; "Economy, Livelihoods & Security"; "Health, Environment, Science & Technology"; and "Artistic Expression and Performance in Africa" (Manuh and Sutherland-Addy, 2013, pp. iii-iv). Multimedia, such as the documentary film *Healers of Ghana* (Dodds, 1993) (originally titled *Bono Medicines*, 1982), were also integrated into the coverage of the aforementioned topics.

As part of the curriculum, the instructors for the course decided to adopt student-centred learning, where students were given more opportunities to play an active role by taking part in small projects, debates, role plays, etc. As part of this, the instructors took up the initiative of celebrating Africa Day. During the Africa Day celebration, students showcased the knowledge that they gained from the course to the university community via ethnic/national dress and/or performance (music, dance, drama, written and oral literature, etc.). The purpose of this class activity was to give students an opportunity to practicalise information from African Studies and Gender Studies, as well as to contribute to the internationalisation of the university.

It was a group activity where each group chose a selected topic in African Studies and Gender Studies and showcased it in any format within 10 minutes. Students brought the properties necessary for their performance. Students' presentations on selected topical issues in African Studies and Gender Studies were assessed by a team of judges from the university teaching staff.

After the panel of judges assessed their performance, scores were given. The criteria for assessment were based on the following: appearance, content, delivery, organization and time, and relevant prop usage. These scores were added to the internal marks that students received in the course.

Significance of the Study

Contemporary Africa is a dynamic and multicultural continent growing its economies at a very fast rate; hence, there is a need for the growing class of Black/African intellectuals to take the lead in supporting national development. This view is not different from the "educational visions" that were articulated by Pan-African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Mwalimu ("Teacher" in the Swahili language) Dr. Julius Nyerere (first Prime Minister of Tanganyika and the first President of the United Republic of Tanzania), for whom, as stated by G. Y. Abraham, education is meant for "creating a good relationship with the society and putting in focus the development of society" (Abraham, 2022, pp. 20, 22). In view of this, there is a need for African students to take courses relating to their roots and developments over the years. In an African country such as Ghana, there are African Studies courses in tertiary institutions where students at the undergraduate level take an introductory African Studies course at some stage in their studies. The African Studies course is part of an interdisciplinary academic field that promotes Africa-focused knowledge for students. It is a university-required course for all students irrespective of their disciplines. The course gives students the opportunity to make sense of realities from the perspectives of all information gained from African cultures in particular, hence building a solid foundation for students to relate to issues from an African viewpoint. Again, beyond the individual's personal experiences, the course tackles disparity issues in the African setting, opening space for Gender Studies

and other identity-based concepts debunking myths, male power, and ethnocentrism.

The “Introduction to African Studies” course at the University of Environment and Sustainable Development (UESD) in Somanya, Eastern Region, Ghana, is taught in units by experts in two fields—African Studies and Gender Studies—and is offered to all second-year students at the university. The bases of its expected learning outcomes are to enable students to (1) articulate a fuller understanding about the historical development and social construction of African societies and civilisations and (2) describe and explain the relationship and impact of gender on development in Africa.

Students who take the course have diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences. This may be one of the reasons for the different perceptions about the course. Ou (2017) agrees with this opinion; he observed, “It is not difficult to notice that, in our contact with the outside world, external objects are the same, whereas our responses towards and interpretations of them are different. This is because perception is culturally determined. Culture influences the way people perceive the world and events” (p. 21). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* defined perception as “a) the way you think about something and your idea of what it is like; b) the way that you notice things with your senses of sight, hearing etc.; c) the natural ability to understand or notice things quickly” (Ou, 2017, p. 18).

Although most students admitted to UESD excelled in related courses such as social studies at the senior high school level prior to entering the university, it is a bit disturbing to note that some students do not give the African Studies course the needed attention, thus devoting less time to its study. Others feel reluctant to attend lectures and hence often turn up late. These and other factors are affecting the performance of some students in the course.

This study explores the learning outcomes and the perceptions of students who took the African Studies course at UESD in the 2022/2023 academic year. Given the “purposive integration of various disciplines applied to solve real-life problems” (Çalışıcı and Sümen, 2018, p. 871) via the incorporation of Gender Studies into the African Studies course, the findings of this study may help both African Studies and Gender Studies lecturers and other stakeholders to come up with better strategies which will benefit both tertiary students and public (and other) institutions of higher learning in Ghana, across the African continent, and beyond. These strategies may also help the contemporary African people to gain better understanding of the course and stimulate the interests of students who see the introductory African Studies course as a wide bridge to cross.

Literature Review

This study has adopted the theory of Afrocentricity. This theory, also known as Afrocentric theory, is an intellectual and political movement that evolved during the 1980s, initially among African American scholars and activists. Specifically, the term Afrocentricity was coined by Molefi Kete Asante (Asante, 2003). Earlier authors who contributed to the emergence of Afrocentricity were Cheikh Anta Diop, a Senegalese scientist who wrote about the cultural unity of Africa, the African nature of Kemetic (Ancient Egyptian) civilization and the “theft” of African civilization by Europeans, and Carter G. Woodson, an African American historian who emphasised the teaching of African history as a way of counteracting feelings of inferiority inculcated in Black people through centuries of subordination by White people.

This theory seeks to reclaim and reassert the cultural, historical, and philosophical heritage of Africa and the global African diaspora, challenging dominant Eurocentric

perspectives and narratives. This approach intersects with the primary reasons why Kwame Nkrumah proposed and implemented the learning of African history and culture in African universities:

1. Centring African experiences and perspectives
2. Challenging Eurocentrism and cultural imperialism
3. Reclaiming African history, culture, and identity
4. Promoting self-determination and empowerment
5. Fostering a sense of community and solidarity among people of African descent

In view of the above, Afrocentric theory has contributed significantly to the fields of African Studies, critical race theory, and decolonial thought channelled in the lessons of students at UESD.

Historical Context and Evolution of African and Gender Studies Curriculum

Origin and Growth of African Studies and Gender Studies

The genesis of African Studies and Gender Studies, particularly within the African knowledge production context, stems from two distinct but interconnected historical pathways. African Studies emerged mainly as a response to the Eurocentric representations of the African continent. As Nkrumah (2013) points out, post-independence African intellectuals sought to reclaim their narratives from the legacy of colonial misinterpretations.

Gender Studies, on the other hand, germinated from global feminist movements that questioned traditional gender roles and the oppression of women. In the African context, it can be argued that African women, facing double colonisation – being African and female – started to question their place in society, fostering the growth of gender-focused studies within the continent (Mikell, 1997).

Evolution of the Curriculum

The curricula for both African Studies and Gender Studies have been dynamic. With the rapid societal changes, new insights, and evolving research methodologies, educators recognised the need for more intersectional perspectives. Crenshaw (1989) introduced the concept of intersectionality to describe the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, leading to overlapping systems of discrimination or disadvantage. This perspective began to influence the African and Gender Studies curriculum, urging scholars to analyse how, for instance, the experiences of an African woman from a lower socioeconomic class differ from those of an affluent African male or a working-class African male.

Furthermore, the concepts of race and class have become central to studies in the postcolonial African context. Scholars recognised the interconnectedness of these facets in shaping experiences, especially as postcolonial Africa grappled with class disparities and the lingering impacts of racial hierarchies (Mama, 1995).

Challenging the Western-Centric Knowledge Production Approach

A significant shift in African Studies was the move away from the traditional Western-centric knowledge production approach. Historically, knowledge about Africa was primarily produced by Western scholars who brought with them inherent biases and often misunderstood or misrepresented African societies (Mudimbe, 1988). The postcolonial period marked a renaissance in African knowledge production. African scholars and intellectuals, equipped with a deeper understanding of their cultures and histories, began to challenge, deconstruct, and redefine the narratives about their continent.

The introduction of African-centred curricula in institutions of higher learning

played a pivotal role in this shift. By focusing on indigenous methodologies, languages, and frameworks, these curricula sought to build a body of knowledge rooted in African experiences and perspectives (Brock-Utne, 2002).

In the realm of Gender Studies, the Western-centric narratives often failed to capture the complex sociocultural dynamics of gender roles and relations in various African societies. Instead, there was a tendency to homogenise and essentialise the experiences of African women. Thus, African feminists and gender scholars embarked on a journey to redefine feminism and gender roles from an authentically African perspective (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

The development of the African and Gender Studies curriculum, particularly within the framework of African knowledge production, serves as a symbolic representation of the wider endeavour to regain and redefine African narratives. Through the integration of intersectional perspectives and the critical examination of Western-centric attitudes, these academic disciplines have flourished into well-established areas of study that comprehensively encompass the diverse and multifaceted nature of African experiences.

Black/African Students' Perceptions and Outcomes

Perceptions of African Studies and Gender Studies Curricula

For Black/African students, African Studies and Gender Studies curricula often hold symbolic importance. Studies indicate that these students perceive these subjects as platforms where their histories, experiences, and identities are centred and validated. Harper (2009) found that curricula focusing on African and diasporic experiences often provide a counternarrative to the predominant Eurocentric education system,

allowing Black students to see themselves represented in academic discourse.

Similarly, Gender Studies can be particularly impactful for Black women, who often find themselves at the intersection of racial and gender discrimination. According to Collins (2000), Black feminist thought challenges the dominant paradigms of Gender Studies by foregrounding the experiences and challenges faced by Black women specifically.

Impact on Academic and Personal Outcomes

Engaging with African Studies and Gender Studies has demonstrable benefits on academic outcomes for Black/African students. Cokley (2003) suggests that these courses foster a sense of belonging and validation, leading to increased academic engagement and performance. Furthermore, these curricula may enhance students' critical thinking abilities as they challenge the traditional narratives that they have previously encountered.

On a personal level, these subjects can significantly impact identity formation and self-concept. By studying the histories, challenges, and triumphs of Black communities and individuals, students can connect their personal experiences to larger sociocultural and historical contexts, fostering a stronger sense of self and community.

Reported Experiences and Challenges

While many Black/African students find these curricula enriching, there are challenges. Some students report feeling tokenised or burdened to be the representative voices for all Black experiences in class discussions, leading to undue pressure and potential stereotype threat (Steele, 1997).

Another challenge is the curricula's comprehensiveness. When it comes to the

diasporic content of African Studies courses that focus on slavery, the academic focus on the “western diaspora”, for example, has been criticised for ignoring the “eastern diaspora” wherein “our brothers and sisters ... were enslaved in the eastern hemisphere of the Afrikan=Black Diaspora”. This can make students from non-Western backgrounds feel excluded or undervalued (Kambon, Songsore, and Aketema, 2023, p. 23).

Influence on Understanding of Identity and Societal Roles

Engagement with African Studies and Gender Studies has profound implications for Black/African students’ understanding of their identities and roles in society. By learning about historical figures, movements, and events centred around Black experiences, students are better equipped to contextualise their place in the world. This can also foster a sense of empowerment and agency, reinforcing the idea that Black individuals and communities have always been, and continue to be, active agents in shaping their destinies, resisting oppression, and contributing to global histories and societies (hooks, 1994).

African Studies and Gender Studies curricula are not just about diversifying educational content. For Black/African students, it is about seeing themselves reflected in what they learn, understanding their histories and potentials, and gaining tools to navigate a world that frequently marginalises their experiences.

Intersectionality and Gender in the African Studies Curriculum

Importance of Gender as a Core Aspect of the African Studies Curriculum

The inclusion of gender is not merely about adding women’s voices or histories but rather entails a critical examination of how gender relations influence power dynamics, social structures, and historical narratives in Africa. Gender plays a pivotal role in

understanding political, economic, social, and cultural processes in the continent (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Ignoring gender equates to neglecting a central component that shapes experiences, identities, and histories of African societies.

Integration of Gender Studies into African Studies

Historically, African Studies was dominated by narratives that marginalised or entirely excluded the roles and contributions of women and non-binary individuals. However, with the rise of feminist movements and Gender Studies globally, there has been a concerted effort to integrate gender perspectives into African Studies. The 1980s and 1990s saw a burgeoning of gender-focused research in Africa (Mama, 1996). As a result, this integration has:

- (a) Highlighted the Roles of Women in History: From queens like Nefertiti of Kemet (Ancient Egypt) and Amina of Zazzau (contemporary Zaria) in Nigeria to modern-day activists, integrating gender has brought to light the pivotal roles women have played throughout African history.
- (b) Introduced Diverse Methodologies: Gender Studies often uses qualitative and participatory methods, which have enriched the research processes in African Studies.
- (c) Challenged Dominant Narratives: It has prompted a reevaluation of existing assumptions and stereotypes, especially those stemming from colonial legacies (Amadiume, 1987).

Benefits, Drawbacks, and Challenges of Integration

The integration of gender perspectives in African Studies has contributed to a more comprehensive and nuanced comprehension of African communities, histories, and cultures.

The empowerment of marginalised voices has been facilitated through gender-focused research, providing a forum for these individuals to articulate and shape their own histories and narratives.

The promotion of equality is facilitated by this integration, which presents a challenge to conventional patriarchal and sexist standards. It serves to advance gender equality not only inside academic settings but also in broader societal contexts.

Limitations and Obstacles

Resistance to the integration of gender-focused research inside academic circles and institutions has been observed, resulting in its occasional marginalisation (Mikell, 1997). The act of oversimplification is a potential danger in the context of gender issues, as it may lead to the essentialisation of these matters or the tendency to see them in isolation without considering the intricate interplay with other overlapping identities, such as ethnicity, social class, or religious affiliation.

There is also the persistent issue of potential Western influence. It has been argued by certain scholars that the models and theories utilised in certain contexts may exhibit a bias towards Western perspectives, perhaps lacking a complete alignment with the African setting (Nnaemeka, 2005).

For Black/African students, the benefits have primarily revolved around visibility and representation. They can now see themselves, their mothers, and their communities represented in the curriculum. However, challenges remain. The curriculum's potential Western influence

might not always resonate with their lived experiences. Moreover, the diversity of the African continent means that a singular gendered narrative might not be representative of all students.

The integration of gender into the African Studies curriculum through the lens of intersectionality has undeniably enriched the field, providing a more holistic, inclusive, and nuanced understanding of the continent's diverse societies. While challenges remain, the shift towards a more gender-inclusive curriculum has paved the way for a more just and equitable representation of Africa in academia.

African Studies and Gender Studies in the Global Educational Landscape

The Place of African Studies and Gender Studies within the Larger Global Educational Context

African Studies and Gender Studies emerge as crucial interdisciplinary fields within the broader humanities and social sciences spectrum. While Gender Studies interrogates how gender influences societal structures, experiences, and identities, African Studies centres on Africa's histories, cultures, and global connections. Both fields challenge the dominant Eurocentric narratives often prevalent in educational systems and contribute towards a more inclusive and holistic understanding of global issues (Adichie, 2009).

Positioning and Influence of African Studies in Global Educational Systems

African Studies, once relegated to the fringes of academic inquiry, has acquired traction in various global educational systems. Several universities in the United States, Europe, and other regions of the globe have departments or centres devoted to African Studies. Its influence can be observed in increased collaborative research between African and non-African institutions (Zeze, 2009), curriculum changes where African literature, histories,

and perspectives are incorporated into broader humanities and social science courses (Mkandawire, 2005), and cultural exchanges where there has been an increase in exchange programmes and cultural initiatives focusing on Africa.

Challenges in Decolonising Gender Inclusivity

A significant challenge in African Studies is the decolonisation of knowledge (Falola, 2022). When the curriculum is taught from a Eurocentric viewpoint, it can further colonial stereotypes and misunderstandings (Maldonado-Torres, 2007). Despite the growing presence of African Studies in universities outside of the African continent, there is a pressing need to prioritise African voices in these narratives. Additionally, there is an underlying concern about African Studies being treated merely as a symbolic inclusion (tokenism) instead of a fundamental component of the curriculum.

African Studies enriches the global educational landscape by offering diverse perspectives that promote critical thinking and challenge dominant, often biased narratives (Said, 1995). The integration of African Studies and Gender Studies ensures that educational systems are more inclusive, catering to a broad range of student populations and fostering global citizenship. The movement towards decolonising knowledge underscores the need to centre African perspectives, methodologies, and epistemologies in African Studies. This decolonisation push also emphasises the vital role of Black/African scholars in leading and shaping the field while advocating for accurate representation (Falola, 2022). Furthermore, true inclusivity in the study of Africa and the global African Diaspora recognises the vast diversity within African societies, including different ethnicities, religions, and genders, highlighting the importance of the intersection between African Studies and Gender Studies (hooks, 1984).

African Studies and Gender Studies play indispensable roles in the global educational landscape, challenging dominant narratives, promoting inclusivity, and enriching curricula. While there are inherent challenges in their positioning, the opportunities they present for a more holistic, diverse, and inclusive education are undeniable.

Methodology

An online qualitative survey was used to examine the perceptions and outcomes of the “Introduction to African Studies” course by involving students from the University of Environment and Sustainable Development (UESD). This university was purposively chosen, as four of the researchers taught this course in this university and were interested in learning how students from various disciplines felt about “Introduction to African Studies” being a mandatory course. The researchers also chose this university because of the African and Gender Studies curriculum that the researchers feel can be replicated in other public colleges and universities in Ghana and beyond. With the help of a literature review and discussions among experts teaching the course, an open-ended questionnaire was designed and administered to avoid restricted responses from the students.

All Level 200 students who took the course during the January to May 2023 session were included in the study. A pilot study was carried out with 10 students, and the outcome aided in the amendment of the final questionnaire. The questionnaire was administered via a Google Forms link to the entire class of 88 students of which 50 students responded. The qualitative responses were analyzed thematically using the Braun and Clarke (2006) approach, which involved carefully reading the responses to become familiar with them, creating codes to represent meanings and patterns, grouping the responses according to these codes, sorting codes into various

themes, as well as reviewing and revising these themes to produce the narrative forms that were presented in the findings section. The coding process evolved until the responses reached a theoretical saturation point (Cresswell, 2012) where no new concepts evolved further.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this study is to assess if the university-mandated “Introduction to African Studies” course is relevant to the students’ fields of study, how students view the relation of this course to their fields of study, and to reassess and revise the course to fit the current environment. In general, there is a broad misconception about the discipline of African Studies, with many believing that it is inappropriate to study and will not lead to employment upon graduation (Sackey, 2014). As a result, students opted for the most employable programmes like those emphasising technology and business. However, since the independence era, the Ghanaian government recognised the importance of African Studies for students in all academic fields and made it a requirement for all public universities and public colleges. It is in this context that this study was conducted to find out the perceptions of students on the relevance and outcome of this course across disciplines.

Profile of the Respondents

Participants in this study were undergraduate students from Level 200 at UESD, representing ten different degree programmes. The largest percentage of students were from the Bachelor of Science Programme in Environment and Public Health (32%), followed by the Bachelor of Science Programme in Sustainable Development (20%), the Bachelor of Science Programme in Geography and Earth Science (12%), the Bachelor of Science Programme in Chemistry and Biological Sciences (10%), the Bachelor of Science Programme in Energy and Resource Economics (6%), the Bachelor of

Science Programme in Energy Sustainability (6%), the Bachelor of Science Programme in Environmental and Sustainability Science (6%), the Bachelor of Science Programme in Water Resources Development (4%), the Bachelor of Science Programme in Environmental Economics and Policy (2%), and the Bachelor of Science Programme in Nature Conservation and Management (2%) (See Fig. 1). An equal number of male and female students chose to participate in this study.

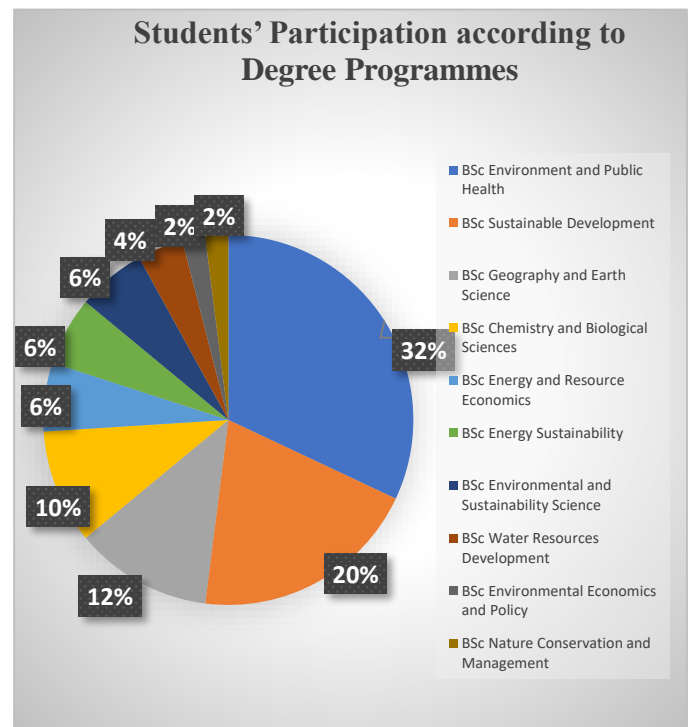


Figure 1: Percentage of Students' Participation according to their Degree Programme

Tertiary Students' Perceptions of the “Introduction to African Studies” Course Incorporating Gender Concepts as a Mandatory University Requirement

The perception and outcome of the students were presented under four themes: (i) Relevance of the course, (ii) Being a mandatory course across disciplines, (iii) Methodology/Course delivery and (iv) Outcome of the course towards Africa's development.

Relevance of Studying African and Gender Studies Curriculum according to Students

Seventy-six percent (76%) of the students thought that the “Introduction to African Studies” course was about the history, culture, and politics of the African continent and would provide in-depth knowledge about the major issues impacting the African continent. This course has an interdisciplinary approach to understanding the experiences of African people that helps students understand the diversity of African civilisations. There were more positive responses about the course and these included the following statement:

It is an important course, and all students must take it seriously, [and] [i]t is a more important course that provides [a] broader understanding of African culture, history and contemporary issues.

Three viewpoints came into focus when the subject of the relevance of studying African Studies was posed: (i) to comprehend the diversity of African culture and the continent’s origins and history; (ii) to affirm African identity; and (iii) to dispel prejudice and misconceptions. Fifty-three percent (53%) of students agreed that newer generations should learn about Africa’s history and culture in order to preserve the depth and positive aspects of their customs and culture; they also believed that it is relevant because it has the potential to empower African students by providing a platform for them to explore and affirm their identity which makes them proud to contribute to the development of Africa. The “Origin of Humanity” and “Classical African Civilisations” were among the topics covered by this course that were particularly impactful in terms of relevance to students. One student said that it was

helpful to understand that civilization didn’t just start in White people’s land[s;] it even started in Africa.

Another student agreed that the course was relevant, saying that it helped to shape our thoughts and our way of doing things in the positive direction. Students who take this course will also learn how to dispel common myths and stereotypes about African culture. As a result, this course is more pertinent for the younger and upcoming generations since it fosters a sense of identity that motivates students to give back to their society and offers information and skills to help shape a promising future for Africa and its emerging leadership, which was also found by Harper (2009) who observed that African and diasporic existential experiences of Black students enable them to see themselves represented in critical academic discourse and become active agents in resisting oppression (hooks, 1994).

When asked about studying gender themes in “Introduction to African Studies,” students gave very positive responses. They added that it is beneficial to be aware of the long-standing gender-based prejudices and discriminations present not only in African society but also throughout the rest of the world. Students believe that learning about gender concepts will help them better comprehend gender issues in African society, particularly the oppression and exploitation of women and girls, as well as the social systems that sustain these inequalities. Students remarked that it will teach them about their rights and freedoms, about respecting one another, and about avoiding gender bias and stereotypes. When questioned about the importance of gender concepts in African Studies for students in different disciplines, students provided positive responses that included the following:

Gender shapes our societies and social interaction[s] and hence need[s] to be studied to overcome the bias and stereotypes, [and] [i]t helps boost our confidence and

hence it is much more needed for girls across disciplines.

Students' observations intersect with those of the African feminist writer Chimamanda Adichie, who, as observed by Falola (2022),

... uses her work to acquaint the average African woman with ongoing developments in gender relations and the new identity of the woman in a postmodern environment. Her ideologies of resilience, boldness, and self-sufficiency are embodied by the protagonist Ifemelu [from the novel *Americanah* (2013)], who is not hemmed in by the constructs of religion or culture but possesses a mindset that transcends such limitations. (pp. 478-479)

Students also responded that it helps them to understand their own gender identity to engage in social activism, question the existing gender norms, gender roles, and power structures, and advocate for gender equality and a just society.

“Introduction to African Studies” as a University-Wide Mandatory Course

“Introduction to African Studies” is a university-required course for students from all disciplines. It is a foundational course that delivers knowledge about African history, culture, and contemporary issues along with gender concepts and gender issues in Africa. Students were asked about how they felt about taking this mandatory course to earn a degree from the university. A few of them reported feeling compelled to take the course, and 78% of them said that they did not feel compelled but were excited to learn, as it fosters critical thinking, global and local perspectives, and social responsibility. A student responded that

ultimately individual students' feelings about a required course can vary based on their personal

interests, goals, and academic motivations. However, even if it is first viewed as a prerequisite, it is worthwhile to consider the potential advantages and chances that such a course can offer.

Hakim (2023) noted while students generally provided a positive evaluation of university-wide courses, their support within discipline-specific departments was more varied. While 98% responded positively when asked about the university-wide mandatory course in the university overall, some were less positive about it from their specific disciplinary perspectives. The statement “I feel that [the] African studies course should be something that all individuals should learn [in order] to maintain peace and stability in the society” was made by another student. Students believe that making African Studies a required course helps in dispelling biases, stereotypes, and misconceptions about Africa and women. Additionally, it encourages the study of African culture and history from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Finally, it helps in the development of the African people worldwide by incorporating African and gender perspectives into academic disciplines.

Nyerere agrees with the respondents as he mentioned the benefits of the African educational system critically teaching its own history, culture and values. He said,

But it is no use our educational system stressing values and knowledge appropriate to the past or to the citizens in other countries; it is wrong if it even contributes to the continuation of those inequalities and privileges which still exist in our society because of our inheritance. Let our students be educated to be members and servants of the kind of just and egalitarian future to which

this country aspires. (Abraham, 2022, p. 23)

Methodology of Teaching African and Gender Studies Curriculum

The teaching method is essential for student engagement and effective learning. It is increasingly crucial to use a variety of teaching techniques and strategies to enhance students' learning experiences. According to Bear and Skorton (2019), "When students can understand and make connections across a diverse array of knowledge and skills, they embark on a path to more rewarding lives and employment opportunities. Higher education can and must do a better job of leading the way out of disciplinary silos" (Bear and Skorton, 2019, p. 60). The following approaches were indicated by students as being utilised by the multiple instructors to teach the course: lectures, multimedia (films, documentaries), group activities, group presentations, and artistic performances (music, dance, and theatre). Ninety-six percent (96%) of the students gave the course's delivery method positive reviews, using words like "excellent", "interesting", "great", "impressive", "perfect", "fun and effective", "creative", and so on. They enjoyed every session, but the art performance, multimedia, and group activities were their favourites. With the use of these diverse techniques, students were able to comprehend a variety of subjects in a way that was clear, better, and simpler for them to recall. An answer from a student was,

The art performances and all of it made it more practical and more fascinating and assisted in producing additional insights on the course itself. My understanding of the course improved with the addition of multimedia and other elements.

One more student remarked,

It was a good one, especially with the usage of videos for several of the lessons. Since it is simpler to recall, I believe that watching things helps them stick better than reading. Since there were different lecturers to teach each subject area, I also believe that the teaching methodology was effective. I was quite proud of the cooperation and solidarity among the lecturers.

Six percent (6%) of the students, however, argued that art performances and presentations should be encouraged more than lectures because they assist in better understanding the concepts.

Each approach is crucial since it contributes significantly to the delivery process. Lectures work well for explaining ideas, as they provide opportunities for presenting key concepts, theories, and thoughts related to the subject. Videos, pictures, and documentaries are all forms of multimedia that help give students relatable and better-understood real-world examples. Group activities help students to participate and learn through their peers. It helps in the exchange of ideas, interaction, and working together to solve problems. Presentations help students present the topic creatively and build boldness to communicate effectively. Art performances are a creative approach that help students explore cultural expressions related to what they learn in the classroom. It is a powerful medium to explore and understand African culture, histories, identities, gender issues, etc.

Benefits and Outcome of the Course Towards Africa's Sustainable Development

Although 94% of the respondents were unable to connect "Introduction to African Studies" directly to their field of study, a student, studying environment and public health education, stated that

[the] knowledge acquired from studying African and gender perspectives and measures will be used to establish [the] mental and social well-being of an individual or [the] population [at large].

In terms of the impact the course has made on students, 74% stated how the course had positively impacted their behaviour, such as the following:

it has made me ... self-discipline[d]; has helped [change] certain perspectives; understood all gender[s are] ... equal and no one is above each other; being a female, I'm now inspired to explore more in my field; it helped me to relate well with other[s]; it helped to value and respect female gender; and so on].

These results are consistent with Aslam and Khan (2023), which showed that Gender Studies programmes assisted students in comprehending and deconstructing their attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts. The students' attempts to reframe their ideas and views towards particular social issues also opened up new opportunities and resulted in a positive attitude change. For example, regarding recent UESD Students' Representative Council (SRC) positions that were being vied for during the second semester of the 2022/2023 academic year, 57% of the candidates were female students; the results were great though only two offices were won by females, with one of those offices being designated for females only (i.e., Women's Commissioner position). There was a female aspirant for the SRC Financial Secretary position, and the results showed that out of the 523 votes cast, a male aspirant won the contest by a margin of only 28 votes. Another female aspirant for the SRC Public Relations Officer position received just 6 votes less than the male aspirant who won the contest (Electoral Commissioner, 2023). The SRC

election results suggest that female students taking up leadership roles in SRCs is not looked down upon in present-day Ghana as it was in the past (Dei et al., 2006). The ultimate aim of this course is to transform students' perspectives, enabling them to develop their own identities and contribute to the development of their local communities and the continent of Africa as a whole. From the analysis, it is well demonstrated that the students' perspectives have changed and started to bring theory into action, which is a good sign for Africa's sustainable development, thus aligning with the findings of McDougal (2021), McDougal and Fischer (2018), Adams (2014), and other scholars about "the *Africana Studies effect*" (or the "Black Studies effect") which improves Black/African students' academic performance, positively transforms students' self-conceptualisation, and cultivates students' agency inside and beyond institutions of higher education.

Knowledge about Africa and gender is essential in the contemporary world and should be instilled in students and the younger generation in order to change perceptions and encourage thinking and acting in favour of an equal and equitable society (Association of African Universities, 2024). Ninety-four percent (94%) of the students agree that prioritising gender and African issues in the production of knowledge will support the sustainable development of Africa. Gender issues must be addressed because when all genders are treated equally and given equal chances in the economy, healthcare, and education, progress towards economic development happens and accelerates the growth of Africa. According to Diop (2015), "As the continent strives to achieve the structural transformation of its economy in order to achieve its agenda 2063 [as charted by the African Union], a greater understanding of the strong linkages between gender equality and sustainable development is a condition *sine qua non* [i.e., 'an essential condition or

requirement’] for its socio-economic transformation” (Diop, 2015, p. 1; Collins English Dictionary, n.d.). The knowledge of gender issues will help develop gender-sensitive policies and programs that will help stop gender prejudice, misconceptions, stereotypes, discrimination, and violence. It will also help reposition men and women as a means of mainstreaming gender to establish an equal and just society (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2024, pp. 127-128). This was understood by the students. According to a student,

[People will work with happiness and will always love to work to increase productivity ... when there is equality and equity [which is accurate and urgently needed].

Limitations of the Study

The study has some limitations due to the smaller sample size and the selection of one public institution purposively. Future studies can be carried out with larger sample sizes and should include public and private tertiary institutions, not only in Ghana but in other African countries. This will give multinational, multiregional, multicultural and multiethnic perspectives about undertaking African Studies courses, which are important components of the ongoing effort to sustain African values and culture which contribute to Africa’s development. The study also assessed students’ perceptions at the conclusion of the course; future studies with a similar focus can provide valuable insight into more specific details about the *development* of Black/African students’ perceptions and outcomes in developing contexts. Another limitation of the study is the potential bias in self-reported data, as students might have provided responses they perceived as socially desirable or aligned with the expectations of the curriculum. One concern with the study is that students may have given answers they thought were “right” or what the teachers wanted to hear, which could make the results less accurate (see the

Appendix for a survey conducted by the student researchers).

Conclusion

African and Gender Studies curriculum in Ghana plays a significant role in the enhancement of Black/African students’ understanding and appreciation of the African people inside and outside the African continent (Stewart, 2024). The study examined students’ perceptions of and outcomes from an African and Gender Studies curriculum, “Introduction to African Studies”, in relation to Africa’s sustainable development. The perceptions of the students were presented under four themes: (i) Relevance of the course, (ii) Being a mandatory course across disciplines, (iii) Methodology/Course delivery, and (iv) Outcomes of the course towards Africa’s development. An open-ended questionnaire was designed and administered to gather the students’ responses on the topic. The results of this study indicate that Black/African students were very satisfied with taking the introductory African Studies course as a part of the required curriculum at a public tertiary institution. These students came to envision themselves as agents directly invested in the historical and contemporary efforts to “decolonize the curriculum” (Falola, 2022, p. 18) of African Studies and other areas of study in universities and colleges across Africa and beyond. The results indicate how students really feel after taking the African Studies course. Indeed, the results suggest that the course may have contributed to the number of female students seeking leadership positions in the institution, as female students appear to now think less about how others may perceive them. “Introduction to African Studies” at UESD inspires students from all disciplines at the university to acquire African-centred knowledge that can be used to contribute to the sustainable development of Africa from non-Eurasian and non-sexist perspectives.

Future research on the impact of “brain drain” and its relationship to contemporary higher education in Africa can benefit from considering and measuring the relevance of African and Gender Studies curriculum to Black/African students’ knowledge acquisition in all areas of study, providing data that could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the problematic trend of graduates from African institutions of higher learning seeking what they perceive to be greener pastures outside the African continent (Jack, 2024).

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