

# Strategic Innovations in Teaching Humanitarian Disciplines, Strengthening Mental and Spiritual Health, and Contributing to the Solution of Regional Problems: A Case Study of the American University of Nigeria

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**Abstract:** The article discusses the problem of strengthening the mental and spiritual health of the nation by pedagogical methods from the standpoint of the philosophy of education. The study was conducted on the basis of a synthesis of innovative approaches in education using the example of modern university education in Russia and Nigeria. The positive experience of the American University in Nigeria in shaping the mental and spiritual health of students as the future intellectual vanguard of the nation is presented. The authors also discuss disadvantages, advantages, and recommendations for a qualitative improvement in the organization of teaching the block of humanitarian disciplines in universities of different countries as an international exchange of experience in the field of humanitarian training of specialists.

## 1. Introduction

The health of the nation is a rather complex sociocultural phenomenon and concept. It combines a number of aspects, from physical (nutrition, morbidity, athletic activity, lack of bad habits, etc.) to the complex of psychological qualities of an individual, which determines people's conscious resistance to stressful situations caused by economic, political, social and other reasons. We are sure that to strengthen the health of the nation, not only medical, but also ethical and social recipes are extremely important [1, 2, 3]. Youth is the future of any country. Young people who are studying in colleges and universities today are becoming the country's main labor and intellectual potential tomorrow.

In this article, we address the most important problem of modern higher education, namely, the formation of a comprehensively developed, professionally trained personality that can coexist harmoniously with people in society, be resistant to stress factors, and positively affect the mental and spiritual health of the nation.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The article uses the materials of the socio-philosophical analysis of innovative processes in humanitarian education related to the strengthening of the mental and spiritual health of students [4]. This has a direct impact on the health status of the whole nation in a particular country (for example, Russia and Nigeria). The following methods are used in the article: philosophical methods of dialectics, a systematic approach, scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, comparative studies, integration of the findings.

### 3. Results and Discussion

It is well known that the block of socio-humanitarian disciplines taught in universities has a pronounced philosophical value, thereby forming the social health of the most educated and intellectually developed youth of any country. However, conceptually, we can highlight alternative options for strategic social settings for training young specialists related to different strategies for managing the life of the people (indigenous people of the territories) in different countries of our time. Depending on the social strategy of a particular country, the specificity of higher education takes place; one or another level of the mental and spiritual health of a nation, people, is determined. Moreover, the potential of the nation, the people can either significantly strengthen, develop, or, on the contrary, weaken sharply, sometimes putting the people on the brink of extinction.

As is known, the following alternative options for social management of the country are possible: 1) for the benefit of the interests of the working people of their own country, to preserve and increase the natural wealth of the country's territories, with coordinated, peaceful international coexistence; 2) for the benefit of narrow oligarchic circles of the country, due to the deterioration of the life of the people, the depletion of the wealth of natural territories, in conflict international relations. One strategy can be described as paternal (paternalistic, similar to the wise authority of the head of the family with concern for the health of the whole large family), i.e., with concern for the authorities about the life and future of their own people, about the well-being of their territories of residence. Another strategy can be described as liberal, providing maximum freedom to oligarchic circles to solve their own interests contrary to the interests of the people, at the expense of the vital potential of the majority of the country's population and its natural territories [5]. In different countries of the world, these alternative variants of strategies and strategic management are implemented by the government of a country, both at the level of national government and in the areas of human life, for example, in education through the ministry of education of a particular country. In different strategies of governing the country, the place and role of education, including humanitarian disciplines, vary significantly. Therefore, this issue may well become the subject of discussion at the level of modern international communities of humanities educators.

In a liberal social strategy, there is a course of the country's authorities on the devaluation of education (training and education) and on the depopulation of their own people (peoples), namely the indigenous population of the country. Social processes are ensured by the following common saying: no person - no problems, no people – no problems. But at the same time, over time, power turns out to be without the support of its own people, which are depleted intellectually, spiritually, physically, and as a result, to be without their people, without a healthy nation. There is a loss of the country's national sovereignty, up to the possible "erosion" of its borders with the uncontrolled export of all national wealth abroad or even before the collapse of the country. Then, such managers are unnecessary in their own country, and they are hated by people. Their destiny is to migrate abroad in the hope of finding a warm haven in foreign territories, like M. Saakashvili.

On the contrary, in the paternal strategy of strengthening and developing the nation, the sovereignty of the country, the course towards the comprehensive development of the individual and the entire people (numerous and small indigenous peoples in different territories of the country) in the real conditions of modern life is quite natural and necessary. In such a strategy, the solution of all social problems from two poles is possible: 1) "from above," at the expense of the concerned people's conservation and nature conservation strategies of the authorities, government of a sovereign country; 2) "from below," due to the meaningful activities of educated, developed individuals and social groups in the process of their social self-government. In this strategy, creatively working people support and strengthen power, and power ensures the comprehensive development of the individual, and it is own people, i.e., the nation of the country. A detailed analysis of humanitarian education in these strategies is becoming a field of wide discussion in Russian education and in the philosophy of education [6, 7, 8, 9].

University management can be oriented both to the dominant management strategy in the country, and to the traditions of university self-government that have developed in the international university community, starting from the New Age. Therefore, the fate of many educational institutions, university teachers, the quality of training of graduates, the rating of a university within the country and abroad also largely depend on the competence of the local university administration. To a large extent, it is in this way that the problems of man in a particular country and education are solved [10, 11]. In turn, since trained professionals in their country

become part of the intelligentsia of the nation, they are largely able to influence its mental and spiritual health positively.

One of the co-authors of this article, P. V. Ushakov, who worked for nine years at the American University of Nigeria in the last year and a half, worked as the head of the department of general education (which provides extensive humanitarian training for students in various disciplines). As an exchange of experience, he presents below the activities of this university in the formation of the humanitarian worldview of students. This aspect of the educational activities of the university helps to strengthen the mental and spiritual health of Nigerian youth. The positive experience gained in this university can be used in the processes of international cooperation in the field of education.

The Department of General Education, existing within the Faculty of Humanities and Natural Sciences, implements several compulsory and elective disciplines. First of all, it is a block of historical and cultural courses, such as African civilization, Western civilization, History and culture of Nigeria, introducing students to the history and culture of the Western world, Africa and Nigeria. Also, it should be noted the socio-anthropological block with such disciplines as Sociology and Cultural Anthropology, which provide an understanding of the fundamental foundations of the existence of society and man. The linguistic block includes Basic Arabic and the Fulfulde language, which are the most important after the Hausa language in this part of West Africa. The most interesting is the block of philosophical disciplines, which includes such courses as Philosophy and Human Existence, History and Philosophy of Science, as well as two not quite ordinary academic disciplines. We will dwell on the last two disciplines to understand the fundamental role of humanitarian education in the possibility of resolving the country's most regional severe problems. These training courses contribute to the development of conscious resistance among young people to the social, cultural, and political stress factors that take place in the life of the country, and also have a positive value in strengthening the psychological and spiritual health of the nation.

The first humanitarian discipline we will focus on is Ethics and Leadership. In modern Nigeria (as in many other countries of the modern world), one of the most important stressful factors that negatively affect the mental and spiritual health of a nation in a region is destructive leadership. It is expressed in the total disunity of the political elite and the people, the purely individualistic and selfish use of power at all levels of society, as well as in the immoral nature of the relationship between representatives of power.

On this occasion, at the beginning of the XXI century, a large number of scientific papers appeared. So, destructive leadership is one of the most hotly discussed topics in modern literature, as one of the fundamental challenges to an optimally organized society [12, 13, 14, 15, 16]. Speaking about Nigeria, it should be noted that, as a rule, it occupies one of the "lowest" places (142th out of 180th in 2018) among the indicators of the Corruption Perceptions Index by the population and is considered one of the most corrupt countries of the African continent. Without a doubt, one of the essential methods of combating destructive leadership is a special educational program that helps students to form a correct understanding of leadership and methods of dealing with toxic leaders, including the special discipline Ethics and Leadership. This discipline is compulsory for all students of 2-3 courses of study. This humanitarian discipline has several main tasks. First of all, this course combines moral philosophy with the theory and practice of leadership, forming the idea of the inextricable connection of these phenomena in social life. Also, this training course involves the understanding of various philosophical concepts, revealed the essence of human life, the nature of morality and ethical behavior. It develops among young people an understanding of optimal patterns and behavioral algorithms, which is essential for creating a favorable moral climate in the activities of the organization where the specialist works.

The second humanitarian discipline at the university, on the analysis of which we will dwell on, is "Comparative Religious Studies: Christianity and Islam." Nigeria is a unique country in terms of religiosity and forms of coexistence in almost equal proportion of representatives of Christianity and Islam in Africa. Thus, according to the latest sociological empirical study conducted by Conrad Hackett with the assistance of the Pew Research group, Nigeria took second place in terms of religiosity after Pakistan. In total, 90% of respondents said that religion is very important in their lives [17]. Unfortunately, the exact number of believers on both sides and their percentage is unknown since any calculations of this kind can cause a violent reaction and accusations from different religious positions. However, certain information in this regard does occur. According to the latest data, the distribution is as follows: Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (46% of

Christians and 52% of Muslims), Afrobarometer (56% of Christians and 43% of Muslims) [18], Association of Religion Data Archives (46% of Christians and 45% of Muslims) [19]. Thus, the data generally indicate the relative equality of representatives of Islam and Christianity in Nigeria. Religion is one of the fundamental constants of personal, group, and social life in Nigeria. This is not only a system of beliefs and rituals, but, which is very important for our analysis, the most important form of an individual's understanding of his place in society, as well as a way of expressing a person's socio-political position. In addition, religion is closely intertwined with tribal relations, creating strong ethno-religious associations of people associated with religious beliefs with social history and tribal identity.

Undoubtedly, the uniqueness of Nigeria lies in the fact that it is not only the most densely populated country on the continent but also a country with a huge ethnic diversity. More than 300 tribal groups live in the country. The largest ethnic groups are almost mono religious. These are such ethnic groups as (1) Hausa/Fulani Kanuri (Muslims), as well as (2) Igbo, Ijav, Tiv (Christians). And only a few, such as Yoruba, include representatives of Islam and Christianity. Also, this problem is exacerbated by the compact localization of ethno-religious groups in the main geopolitical zones of Nigeria, which can lead to geopolitical conflicts in the country under negative social conditions. So, there is a different localization of the population in different parts of Nigeria. Hausa/Fulani, Kanuri are localized in the North; while Igbo, Ijav are localized in the Southeast; Yoruba are localized in the Southwest; Tiv, Birom are localized in Central Nigeria [20].

The introduction of the subject "Comparative Religion: Christianity and Islam" at the university enables students to familiarize themselves with the fundamental principles, belief systems, and rituals of the two most common religious traditions in West Africa: Christian and Muslim. This academic discipline, firstly, not only reveals the fundamental principles of two world religions but also aims at the modern understanding of various forms of spirituality and especially the essence and role of religion in 21st-century society. Second, this course is aimed not only at understanding the unique dogma and doctrines of the two main religious traditions, but also at revealing their common monotheistic bases. In real life, this makes it possible to realize the possible ways of coexistence of believing groups of the country's population. In addition, in this course, an amazing variety of rituals, rituals, and celebrations of these religious traditions are revealed. A balanced, rational, and, most importantly, a tolerant attitude of believers of one religion towards representatives of another religion, towards their beliefs and way of life is being formed.

In conclusion, we can say that long work in the Humanitarian Department of the American University in Nigeria allowed us to gain diverse positive experiences in teaching at the university. As a result, it is possible to develop a meaningful, practice-oriented approach of students to social events, and strengthen their social health.

#### **4. Conclusion**

At the end of our article, we would like to return to the general issues of humanitarian education and its role in shaping the spiritual and intellectual health of a nation. We will note the shortcomings and advantages of existing in humanitarian education. We will formulate some proposals for its improvement.

The disadvantages of modern general Russian humanitarian education (possibly, and not only Russian) are as follows. Discipline programs are very static, more often they are distracted from the real problems of the contemporary social life of the country, especially from regional problems. A significant number of students, if they do not feel the real benefit of a particular academic discipline in their life, lose interest in it. The regional component in the humanities is extremely poorly represented.

The strengths of humanitarian education are as follows. First, it offers world and purposeful perspectives, strengthening the humanitarian potential for personal development. It also promotes the development of communication skills, ultimately aimed at the ability of the individual to self-improvement. There are several, in our opinion, possible ways to improve the teaching of humanities at the university are as follows. 1. Deep understanding by the leadership of the university and faculties of the importance of not only professional but also general humanitarian training of students. The value of wise university self-government and management of pedagogical activity in the "teachers – students" system is high. Second, the exemption of teachers from the routine senseless paperwork with documents, which divides the "lion's share" of teachers' working time from their main activity, namely, work with the student audience during academic and extracurricular (for education and practice) time. Third, the decrease in the exploitation of the intellectual work of teachers, due to which the

teaching load is constantly increasing, and the quality of teaching activity is sharply reduced. Fourth, in the total working time of a university teacher, such a part of it should be allocated, where he can engage in in-depth self-training, improving his scientific and pedagogical skills.

We are confident that humanitarian education must timely, pedagogically, correctly respond to the challenges of our time. We believe that a properly built system of teaching humanitarian disciplines at the university and a proper attitude to it at all levels of education management will ultimately contribute to the achievement of the student's qualities as a comprehensively developed personality. In our opinion, there is the general beneficial effect of university humanitarian education on the mental and spiritual health of the nation and the people of their country.

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