

“Some kind of disorder”: The negative effects of modularisation on student learning in a Rwandan university context

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In recent years, many African universities have attempted to improve the academic quality of their programmes by reforming their curricular structures. Such reforms often take the form of innovations first advocated in higher education systems elsewhere in the world. The result of this international policy borrowing is a marked convergence of curricular structures and definitions of academic quality. This paper considers the impact of a Rwandan university’s decision to adopt a modular curricular structure modelled on the European Credit Transfer & Accumulation System. Evidence from a recent empirical study of teaching and learning at the university indicates that modularisation was adopted without sufficient consideration of how the pre-existing teaching orientations of the lecturing staff might affect the implementation of the new structure and suggests that the top-down nature of the policy change has ultimately had a negative impact on student learning.

In an era of increasing student mobility, the desire for harmonisation of higher education structures and qualifications – both within and across countries – has motivated the creation of new transnational regulatory frameworks that govern academic decision-making processes within institutions (Altbach & Teichler, 2001). Although explicitly aimed at enhancing the employability of European students and bolstering regional economic competitiveness (Bologna Declaration, 1999), one such framework - the Bologna Process - has had a substantial impact on higher education systems beyond its intended regional boundaries. In recent years, many African universities have attempted to improve the academic quality of their programmes by reforming their curricular structures, often imitating strategies advocated as part of the Process. The result of this international policy borrowing is a marked convergence of curricular structures and definitions of academic quality. Although there is widespread support for revitalisation efforts, particularly in light of the neglect of higher education by the international community in recent decades, such imitative practices risk exacerbating entrenched academic quality issues, unless adequate attention is paid to local dynamics, attitudes and understandings of teaching and learning in higher education.

This paper considers the effects of curricular convergence on one institutional context: the National University of Rwanda (NUR).¹ In 2008, the university elected to adopt a modular curricular system, modelled explicitly on the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), developed out of the Bologna Process. Following the guidelines of ECTS, modules at NUR are divided into three components: contact hours, independent work and examinations. The system was designed to encourage student-centred pedagogy by shifting the emphasis of the curriculum from teacher-led

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instruction to independent student learning ([Gahutu, 2010](#)). However, results of a recent study of teaching and learning at NUR (Schendel, 2013) suggest that, rather than improving academic quality, the modular structure appears to be having a negative impact on student learning across the university.

Data from group and individual interviews with faculty members and students reflect campus-wide frustration with the new curricular format. Faculty participants indicated that students tend not to complete assigned independent work, as they view any time outside of the classroom as 'free time'. However, they also suggested that very few faculty members penalise students for not completing assignments, as most expect their students to avoid independent assignments. In fact, some argued that students should not be expected to do work outside of class, given the financial difficulties that many face. Participants in this category expressed empathy with students who choose to spend their time in paid employment, instead of completing their coursework.

Evidence from the faculty interviews indicates apparent confusion around the intended objectives of the modular system. Many faculty participants reported that the introduction of the modular system had made it harder for them to cover the required course content. Prior to the implementation of the modular system, each course at NUR comprised twice as many contact hours as is allowed within the modular format. Most faculty participants indicated that they had responded to the new curricular requirements by simply condensing their previous content in order to fit it into the new structure. Although the new system was intended to introduce an entirely new way of teaching at NUR, very few instructors appear to have fundamentally revised their courses. In fact, instructors may now be *less* likely to experiment with new pedagogical techniques, as they are now attempting to cover the same course content in a shorter period of time.

Students also appear to find the modular system disorienting and frustrating. A number of student participants mentioned that final examinations often include content neither covered in lecture nor assigned as independent work. When asked about such practices, lecturers responded that students are supposed to use their independent study time to learn everything they can about the module topic, so as to be able to respond to any potential examination question. It is unsurprising that students raised in a secondary school system dominated by rote learning practices would be overwhelmed by the prospect of anticipating – and independently learning – what might appear on a final examination. There also appears to be little scaffolding in place to help students adapt to the partially unstructured nature of the curriculum. Although NUR requires students to take a course on

Study Skills in their first year, the course does not support student adaptation to the modular structure by modelling independent research or critical reading skills.

The results of this case study underscore the vital importance of implementation in the educational policy borrowing process (Phillips & Ochs, 2003). By all accounts, adoption of the modular system at NUR was a top-down process in which lecturers and students played almost no role. Faculties were expected to rapidly adopt the new structure, and little opportunity was provided for dialogue around the rationale for – or the pedagogical implications of – a modular system. Baxter Magolda (1999) has argued that pre-existing beliefs about the nature and practice of teaching is a deeply rooted professional identity unlikely to change as a result of imposed policies. Data from the study indicates that faculty members at NUR tend to demonstrate a “knowledge transmission” orientation towards teaching (Kember & Gow, 1994). Such an orientation does not align well with the principles underlying the modular system, given its emphasis on independent student learning. It is therefore unsurprising that, in the absence of any attempt to build a shared understanding of the new curricular structure, individual instructors appear to have modified the new curricular requirements to match their pre-existing understanding of their professional role and function. The result is a curricular system which may conform to global norms but actually impacts negatively on student learning. Many have argued that an appropriate balance between academic challenge and student support is a fundamental condition for cognitive development to occur (Blaich & Wise, 2010; Kuhn, 2005; Moon, 2008; Tsui, 2002). The adoption of modularisation at NUR appears to have reversed this balance, to the detriment of the student population.

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