

Relevance and Realism in General Education: An Implementer's Viewpoint

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INTRODUCTION

The success or failure in implementing any policy or programme depends on at least three sets of factors: the goals and objectives; available resources and the relevant operative conditions. This paper examines the issues and problems pertaining to the implementation of the general education programme for undergraduates from the perspective of an implementer. The intention is not to report on any particular situation, but rather to draw attention to some of the issues commonly faced by coordinators of comparable general education programmes worldwide. The first part after this introduction begins with a description of an ideal general education model, followed by an outline of a typical programme which elucidates the general principles commonly adopted as the main objectives for such programmes. The second part presents a list of implementation problems encountered by the author, either those distilled from reports written by others or from his own recent experiences in developing the general education component of the undergraduate programme at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). The concluding section provides a brief summary of the discussion followed by suggestions for future thoughts on the subject.

Definition of general education is abundant but for the purpose of this paper it refers to that part of the undergraduate program which is designed to develop in student the common understandings, skills, and attitudes which (s)he needs to function effectively as an individual, as a member of a family, and as a citizen. To the extent that individual and societal needs and goals vary cross-culturally, we may say that the model adopted in other societies may be either relevant or irrelevant to the situation at issue. Being relevant, however, does not necessarily mean being realistic. Whereas relevance is a judgement in relation to goals, realism is associated with the capacity to implement those goals. It is concerned with the availability of resources (here includes teaching and curriculum development expertise), required to achieve those goals. Beside available resources the capacity to implement depends on the operative conditions which are usually couched in terms of institutional framework and in terms of socio-economic, cultural and political conditions.

GENERAL EDUCATION: BETWEEN THE IDEAL AND THE TYPICAL

An ideal general education model is one that frees the individual from whatever constraints that might hinder his intellectual and vocational development as a person. At the undergraduate level he is to have a wide choice of available subjects to suit his needs and interests. This is the liberal approach. The ideal situation also offers the widest possible range of choices which covers all the basic fields of knowledge. Beyond these students are also given the liberty to choose the mental-discipline service courses' such as thinking and reasoning skills, computer literacy, logic and mathematics and courses of the different modes of effective communication. Courses in the thinking component not only cover modules on

how to think critically and creatively, but also the reflective elements as are typically offered in philosophy, comparative ethics and issue-oriented discourses. The ideal offering may also allow for the so-called ‘smogasbord’ combination of choices, i.e. students make their choice according to individual needs and interests. In terms of pedagogical approach, such courses can be conducted with an emphasis on student-centred instructions and activities, which may depart considerably from the tradition of teacher-centred classroom practices.

For a number of reasons the ideal approach as outlined above has never been a sustainable feature in the undergraduate programme anywhere. To begin with, there are always disagreements among education planners on the most effective approach to tertiary education, especially on the no-man’s-land subject called general education. While there are those who see such free-wheeling structure as tantamount to future anarchy and disharmony in society, others see it as logistically impossible to manage, in terms of facilities, class schedules and cost effectiveness. Moreover the model is unrealistically an apolitical one, meaning there is no state intervention on the goals towards which the society is heading whereby education can be used as an instrument for nation-building.

The typical general education programme is often discussed in association with the so-called ‘cafeteria’ approach in which the freedom of choice is limited to what is deemed by the general education steering committee as relevant and realistic. Relevant because the options offered has tangible utilitarian value, and realistic because such options can be implemented within the bounds of available resources... funds, teaching staff, facilities and the students’ literacy level. The defining criteria for relevancy and realism are, in the final analysis, also context-specific. They cover many non-economic and non-academic needs in society, some of which are non-negotiable.

The typical programme worldwide veers towards the American model which contains a structured ‘distribution’ comprising a half dozen largely discipline - based subject groupings. For example an American general degree programme may stipulate the following distribution requirements:

- Humanities and Fine Arts
- Social and Behavioral Sciences
- Natural Sciences and Mathematics
- Culture and Society
- Personal and Community Health
- Foreign Language

Each subject grouping may contain numerous courses to choose from. By choosing at least one course from each grouping a student is presumed to get some exposure to the intellectual sense of the subject area. In this way the student will be generally exposed to a selection of general knowledge segments expected of the graduate from a tertiary institution. Beside the above distribution component, there is a skill component which may consist of information processing, thinking and communication, and problem solving. In most Commonwealth countries, these courses are offered in schools and are regarded as foundation courses. In a few instances foundation courses of a remedial type are offered in the first year of the undergraduate programme.

The more common approach in recent years is to adopt a purposeful strategy in which prescribed courses are made compulsory. The popular selection include the following:

- Oral and Communication Skills
- Creative and Critical thinking
- Computer Literacy
- Society and Culture
- National History
- Art Appreciation
- Foreign Language
- Basic Statistics
- Research Methodology

The general considerations underlying the choice of a particular admixture of general education courses, as mentioned earlier, rests on what is regarded as priority needs of the future graduate who is expected to play a productive role in society. Whereas his particular field of specialization (the major in the programme), is expected to equip him with the basic professional expertise in his career of choice, the general education programme is meant to build his character which encompasses elements of leadership and organizational skill, intellectual capability, identity and consciousness as a citizen and a member of the family and the local community. Premium is increasingly attached to the following abilities upon graduation:

- the ability to communicate effectively, written and oral.
- the ability to be innovative and proactive.
- the ability to source and process information through the use of current IT.
- the ability to lead and hold an argument based in a broad command of general knowledge.
- the ability to socialize through knowledge of a wide range of general subjects and leisure activities including sports and art appreciation.

GENERAL EDUCATION AT UNIVERSITI KEBANGSAAN MALAYSIA

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) or the National University of Malaysia was established in 1970. Its name reflect a nationalist spirit which pressed for the constitution of the Malaysian identity based on Malay as the National Language and Islam as the official religion of the state. At the inception stage academic planning was inspired by the belief that students should be exposed to a comprehensive (knowledge, especially) exposure to both the natural sciences and the social sciences and humanities. It is a matter for further examination as to whether this orientation arose out of the rejection of a system of secondary level schooling which left entrants with a legacy of dualism, science and arts. Or could it be that many of the vocal academic planners were previously trained in Commonwealth universities where the American-style general education prevailed in the 1960s? By 1973 the balanced orientation was phase out in favour of a general education course called Malaysian Nationhood which was a composite course offering fragments of knowledge on various aspects of the Malaysian society and culture, physical and human.

In response to a cabinet directive in 1983 the course was enlarged to include Islamic Civilization as a complementary section of the general education module. Ten years later a decision was made to expand the general education course into a 'programme' comprising of the above compulsory course plus a newly-conceived range of compulsory distribution courses which were intended to cover three balanced categories of choices: the value component; the skill component; and the breadth of knowledge component. To this end the General Studies Centre which was formed in the early 1980s was enlarged to the status of a faculty level centre, with a clear mandate to re-organise general education courses in such a way that from 1995/1996 session onwards undergraduate programmes would allow students to complete between 20 to 30 percent of their work load from general studies. This proportion includes over 15 percent worth of compulsory courses already offered by the then Language Centre (12 units of English proficiency courses) the Centre for General Studies (4 units of Islamic Civilization and Malaysian Nationhood), and Centre for Co-Curricular Studies (2 unit option). The remainder was to be taken from a long list of courses to be offered by 13 faculties in 1995. By then the Center for General Studies began to offer seven elective courses, designed to cover areas which are not covered in the programmes of the existing faculties. In response to a directive from the University administration over 220 courses were submitted by faculties for inclusion in the general studies programme. This structure of course offering remains valid to the beginning of the present (1997/1998) academic session.

The expanded version of the general education programme is to some extent inspired by the typical US general education programme as adopted by the Western Michigan University. The Centre has conducted a benchmarking survey covering universities in Asia, Europe, Middle East and a few other developing countries to complement information from Michigan. Despite this scanning exercise, there is still a measure of uncertainty over the preferred model. Between the UK approach which has phased out its general education component, to the Japanese Kyoto model which takes up the first 1½ years of the undergraduate programme, and the nationally defined MAKDU courses of Indonesia, lies the lingering questions pertaining relevance and realism.

IMPLEMENTATION ISSUES AND OPTIONS

A study of the general education planning literature, mostly reports on the American practice, suggest a number of familiar issues in the implementation process, while some of the issues may originate from deficiencies in leadership and administration, others may be traceable to contextual or situational problems. To begin with the success of any academic programme will always depend on the following variables:

1. Quality of student at the entry point
 - Their command of foundation knowledge.
 - Their proficiency in the language.
 - Their interest in and attitudes to the programme.
 - Their culture of orientation especially pertaining to sense making and articulation.
 - Possible role-strain in discourse especially relating to beliefs and work

load.

2. Status of General Studies among students and academics
 - Lack of understanding of general education objectives.
 - Image problem with respect to university priority.
 - Student perception of its intellectual and curricular value.
 - Evaluation methods.
3. Quality and quantity of academic and support staff assigned to programme.
 - Attitude, scholarly aptitude and commitment.
 - Basis of posting: transitory? Part timer?
 - Academic qualifications and training in general education.
 - Length of teaching experience and workload.
 - Command of languages other than mother tongue.
4. Curriculum and pedagogy
 - Tailor-made courses vs what's available.
 - Lecture size and nature of course requirements.
 - Orientation of teaching: encourage thinking/rote learning?
 - Teacher/student centredness.
5. Teaching/learning environment
 - Legal/cultural incentive/disincentive to freedom of dis-course.
 - 'Barefoot doctor' problems.
 - Extra-curricular intellectual climate in campus and outside.
6. Facilities
 - Class and reading material, available/accessible.
 - Adequacy of space for lecture and tutorial.
 - Availability of teaching assistants.
 - Logistic and technological support esp. audiovisual.
 - Class attendance monitor equipment and parallel video channels.
7. Mode of teaching and learning
 - Problem of implementer alienation.
 - Problem of control-compliance gap, faculty cooperation.
 - Degree of support from superior and colleagues.
 - Workload and experience of implementer.

CRITICAL ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

The following list illustrates a number of possible issues that may have been faced by implementers, their responses and some comments of what needs to be done to address

the issues.

1. Tuition - recipient culture from school - burden of intellectual development.
2. Status general studies - spare room image problem, excess baggage, measles.
 - no unit value, no commitment, low rate of class attendance.
 - HRD, nor trained, applicant only those where nobody.
 - Must be accorded higher stature, to see linkages need professional support.
3. Student
 - Don't know purpose – *taklimat*.
 - poor general knowledge, religious conflict, repeat performers.
 - forced to take - goal of first year student.
 - mass class, difficult to control.
 - OMR, student senior culture, little reading when we really need reading.
4. Curriculum
 - not tailor-made for general education.
 - lack thinking element in the mode of recipient learning.
5. Teaching environment
 - barefoot doctor place and time.
 - large class, crowd control.
 - Workload.
6. Facilities
 - technology doesn't always work, mass class.
7. Mode of teaching
8. Implementer's solitude
 - academic alienation, lack of faculty collaboration, one-way tendencies.
 - no proactive support, the burden of delivery on implementer.
 - regulations pertaining to general education are not always easy to enforce

The capacity of the implementer to address the above issues obviously depends on how much time he puts into the planning and execution of tasks and how much support he gets from the community of instructors and students. From the issues listed in the foregoing three main areas deserve further elaboration.

1. The need to canvass faculty support. Perhaps the most difficult issues to address is on how to get consensus out of a non-consensual community of scholars who have different perspectives on problems. This is especially pertinent in goal setting stage in which there has to be some general agreement on what constitutes an appropriate general education

programme, and on how to implement this common goal. A rationalised strategy towards defining an effective approach is certainly needed with continuous discussion and negotiation, possibly under the guidance from the steering committee

2. The need to create campus-wide awareness on the purpose of general education, both among instructors and student, and among academic decision-maker There is no short cut to this; the Centre will have to organize more consciousness raising campaigns, seminars and ‘roadshows’ involving all sections of the academic community within and outside the campus. The need to motivate students and lecturers to learn the Kaizen style to teaching and learning should help to develop that critical mass of awareness and interest. There is considerable malaise over the future of general education which seems to be a common phenomenon everywhere. This happens because of lack of, or diffused state of accountability.

3. Quality Control through monitoring is therefore, most essential. Ultimately the target groups will have to be convinced of the value (including market value) of the general education component of the undergraduate programme. The burden of implementing a common ‘need’ surely must be shared by all parties, since in the end every graduates produced by the relevant faculty will be tested in the market not only account if their capability in their respective fields of specialization, but also on their overall character and intellectual quality which general education helps to mould.

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