

Approaches of Malaysian General Education at Tertiary Level: A Plural Outlook

ZAHARAH HASSAN AND MASHITOH YAACOB

INTRODUCTION

All education systems in the world are designed to guide people in learning a culture, moulding their behaviour in the ways of adulthood, and guiding them towards eventual role in the society. It is the platform that provides and facilitates knowledge creation and transfer. The purpose of this paper is to examine the general education programme currently being implemented by three universities in Malaysia. They are Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), University of Malaya (UM) and Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). It discusses the purpose, the structure and the content of general education. It also tries to answer questions such as how much time is allocated to general education subjects; when do the students take these subjects; concentrated or spread; are the subjects freely elected or offered as a compulsory programme or loose series of elective courses, and what are the courses that are considered to be under general education. Finally, the paper concludes with some suggestions for improving general education programme.

UKM and UM were chosen because of their long standing tradition in social sciences, whereas UPM was selected because of its inclination towards the physical sciences. Education is generally understood as a knowledge acquisition process and the certificates or diplomas awarded are measures of the standard attained. Although the role of learning institutions are to prepare students for the job market, it is equally important to guarantee that graduates are capable of serving the community and contribute toward social and economic development.

In Malaysia, we have become familiar with an educational system that is examination oriented. The success and the failure of the students are frequently measured by their academic performance. For example, a student who scored several A's in his/her Malaysia Certificate of Education is always considered to be an excellent student. The priority in getting scholarships and other benefits always belong to this group. This type of orientation encourages rote learning and as a result we are producing students who are only good in the academic work. The system does not provide enough opportunities for an overall development of the students as an individuals. As in most other countries, the Malaysian higher educational system tends to be a discipline-oriented with a high degree of specialisation. While society requires many specialists to perform specific tasks, it is questionable whether specialisation at the undergraduate level is necessary. We only have to look around to see the kinds of individuals who are successful. Generally they are the ones with the ability and talent. At present, the majority of universities are packaging educational contents with a high degree of specialisation and there is little efforts made to encourage students to expand their learning base. This paradigm has to change in order to ensure that future graduates are equipped in both knowledge and skills to be

competent in their assigned roles in the market place. General education may be the answer to this need.

WHAT IS GENERAL EDUCATION?

The term general education connotes different things to different people. Some view it as a pre-requisite for specialised study. Some consider general education to be precisely the opposite: an antidote to specialization. John Dewey regards general education as “an integrative experience underlying the unity of knowledge”, while former Harvard President A Lawrence Lowell describes it as a sum total of “a number of general courses in wholly unrelated areas” (Boyer and Levine, 1983). This may arise from a view that perceives general education as a spare room in the house of intellect. At colleges and universities, the typical undergraduate curriculum might be compared to a three-room house. The rooms are the major, electives and general education. While the first two rooms have clear purpose and ownership, the third room, general education, is different from the other two. It does not belong to anyone in particular and the purpose of this room appears vague. Though general education is possible to be defined as the breadth component of a college education, any agreement beyond that quickly fades.

The diversity and contradictory nature of these views prove that general education, despite its problems of definition is dynamic enough to accommodate and change according to needs and requirements of the society at any given time. In UKM, General education is defined as an educational programme that aims to equip undergraduates with the knowledge and skills to enable them to live in a modern society. Through general education, students are exposed to subjects related to the understanding of universal values, history, responsibility towards society, analytical and quantitative skills, communication techniques, arts appreciation, culture and utilisation of leisure time in a productive way (Buku Panduan Pusat Pengajian Umum 1997/98).

PURPOSE OF GENERAL EDUCATION

Malaysia as a developing nation, stresses on the importance of general education as reflected in the national education philosophy:

Education in Malaysia is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in, and devotion to, God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens who are knowledgeable and competent, who possess high moral standards, and who are responsible and capable of achieving high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, society and the nation at large (see the Ministry of Education homepage at: <http://eprd.kpm.my/edu-sys>).

Clearly, the ultimate aim of the Malaysian education system is to produce a well-rounded person that is capable of functioning effectively in society.

In the 1997/98 prospectus, the Vice Chancellor of UKM gives the broad objectives of the general education. He believes that the general education and co-curricular components of the programme will broaden one’s horizon beyond the confines

of his/her discipline. How far is this aim being realised by the universities in Malaysia? Are universities doing what they are supposed to do or are they merely responding to market demand for work-force needs? What kind of general education are they promoting?

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

GENERAL STUDIES IN UKM

General studies or general education in UKM is strongly promoted. Its concept is embedded in the philosophy of the university and this is the foundation upon which the aim and the objectives are established. Here, general education was originally introduced as part of the programme to produce individuals who can function effectively in contemporary society as well as in the future. Courses for general studies started at the same time when the university was established in 1970.

In 1983, the Centre for General Studies was established to strengthen the general studies programme. The Centre was responsible to conduct two compulsory courses on Islamic Civilization and Nationhood that carried four credit hours for all students. These two courses are still made compulsory because it is considered important that every student has the basic knowledge about Islam since it forms one of the main elements in the culture and administration of the Malaysian society. Students are also expected to know about the establishment of Malaysia as nation state and other aspects such as its development policy, economy, culture, national language, etc.

The scope now is wider, as communication skills, thinking skills, knowledge and understanding of philosophy, foreign languages and arts appreciation are also included. Besides running the compulsory courses, the centre also offers nine other courses for students throughout the university. At present the courses are as follows:

- History of Thoughts I
- History of Thoughts II
- Comparative Ethics
- The Development of Science and Human Civilization
- Personal Hygiene
- Leadership and Interpersonal Skills
- Thinking Skills
- Philosophy of Development
- Environmental Philosophy

All faculties in UKM, with the exception of the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Medicine do offer some of their courses to students outside their faculties. These are the courses that they agreed to list under general studies programme. Together with the non-compulsory courses offered by the Centre for General Studies there are about 351 such courses for 1997/98 session. These courses can be divided into three thematic groupings:

1. Understanding of values and history of Malaysia as a nation
2. Communication and quantitative skills
3. The broader knowledge covering various subjects

All undergraduate students in UKM are required to select major and minor courses by the time they sit for their final examination before graduation. In order to graduate the students must fulfil the requirement of a minimum of 120 credits which cover courses from their major, minor, compulsory courses namely English language (12-14 credits), Islamic Civilization and Nationhood (four credits) and co-curricular activities (two credits) and elective courses from general studies programme (from three different groups as mentioned above). A student who does not fulfil this requirement cannot graduate even though (s) he has completed 120 credits and has passed all examinations. Results from the examination of these subjects, with the exception of co-curricular activities, will be taken into account in the calculation of Cumulative Grade Point Average. The amount of credit hours for general education courses differs from faculty to faculty as shown in Table 1. The Table reflects various approaches and the degree of commitment from respective faculties towards general education. Even though the requirement for general education is clearly stated in the philosophy of the university and the Vice-Chancellor himself keeps stressing on the importance of general education for quality graduates, some faculties still keep their students within the confinement of courses offered by their own faculties. Elective courses offered by faculties often concentrate on subjects within their own discipline. For example, in the Faculty of Law, students are required to take 24 elective courses but all of them are about law such as Labour law, Consumer Law, Tax Law, Law and Society, etc.

TABLE 1: Credit requirement for graduation according to faculties in UKM

No	Faculty (1)	Programme (2)	Compulsory courses (3)	Creative Thinking (4)	Compulsory from Faculty (5)	Compulsory from mod. (6)	Elective from faculty (7)	Elective from outside fac. (8)	Complementary course (9)	Total credit req. (10)
1	Econ.	Econ Integrated Econ	18 18	66	42 42	21 24-27	66	19 19	8 2-5	120 120
2	Language Studies	Degree in English studies	18	(Malay Lang.) 6	(Major) 61	(minor) 20	-	15	-	123
3	Law	Bachelor in Law	(Eng. and Arabic) 6+16	-	102	-	24	-	-	148
4	Life Science		4+12+2		89-94	-	8			120
5	Islamic Studies		4+12+2		36	52		4	12	120
6	Education	B. Ed. TESL B Ed SainsBED Special Ecuc.	6 6+12 6+12		35 35 35	64 62 64	83	18		123 123 120
7	Business and Management	B.B Ad B Acc.			56 83		44 23		2 (prac.) 2	122 128

GENERAL STUDIES IN UNIVERSITY OF MALAYA

In the University of Malaya, a minimum credit requirement for graduation is also 120 credits and this may differ from faculty to faculty. Usually the total credit number is inclusive of subjects/courses from their major, minor, compulsory courses such as citizenship (four credits), English language (eight credits) and co-curricular activities (two credits), and elective courses (either from their faculties or others). Table 2 shows the curriculum structure for three Faculties in the University of Malaya;

TABLE 2: Credit requirement for graduation according to faculties in UM

No	Faculty	Prog.	Compulsory Course	Compulsory from mod.	Compulsory from Fac.	Elect. from Fac.	Elect. from outside Fac.	Total unit req.	Notes
1	Econ.	B. Econ.	14 (Citizenship Eng. and CC)	52	24	15	15	120	
		B. Acc.	14	17	81	15	9	136	
		B. B. Ad.	14	27	42	21-22	15	120	
2	Academy of Malay Studies		14	39	39	21 (not from major dept.)	15	122	
3	Education	b. Ed. TESL					6 courses	147 (inclusive of 12 credits for practical teaching)	Students are required to take 40 credits in every level (3 levels)

Students must take their courses at appropriate levels, that is, level one to three. Each level consists of two parts. Students are allowed to take no more than 24 credits per part or per semester. Except for elective courses from other faculties, all the courses are prescribed even for electives within faculty. The type of courses offered are plenty, from sciences, languages to arts appreciation, and students are advised to spread them over a three- year period.

GENERAL STUDIES IN UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

Universiti Putra Malaysia or UPM is another higher institution that is said to be a believer in general education. Although it was biased towards agricultural programmes in the past, it has recently shifted their focus towards information technology. Now, the university also offers a degree programme in Human Development, Business, Computer Science, Languages and Music, besides the traditional disciplines like agriculture, food technology, veterinary science and others.

Generally, all undergraduate students at UPM are required to take a minimum of 120 credits to enable them to graduate. Out of this figure, 70 percent or about 84 credits, must be from major courses. This comprises basic courses, core courses, communication, management, English language, computer, Islamic civilization and nationhood.

Other than that, students are also required to register for co-curricular courses. They are not allowed to take more than 6 credits throughout their undergraduate studies and only 1 credit per semester. The courses offered are culture, theatre, music, dance, self-defense, leadership in student unions, Red Cross and Scout.

The courses to be taken are divided into three levels i.e., level one, two and three. Each level is divided into two parts or semester. For each semester students must take a minimum of 12 credits and a maximum of 20 credits or more depending on the faculty requirement.

Elective courses or minor courses are usually taken at level two and three, and are determined by the faculty. Below are some of the structure currently being use:

a) Bachelor of Engineering (Aerospace)

Level 1	39 credits
Level 2	36 credits
Level 3	36 credits
Total	111 credits *****
Minimum requirement	120 credits

***** The courses are determined and offered by Engineering faculty.

Another 12-19 credits are supplied by Islamic civilization, Nationhood, English language and co-curricular activities.

b) Bachelor of Engineering (Electric & Electronic)

Level 1 (inclusive of Islamic civilization, English or elective)	39 credits
Level 2 (Inclusive of Nationhood)	46 credits
Level 3 (Inclusive of communication theory)	36 credits
Total	121 credits
Minimum requirement	120 credits

c) Bachelor of Science (Biology) Faculty of

Major courses	84 credits
Islamic civilization	04 credits
Nationhood	02 credits
English language	02 credits or more
Communication	03 credits
Management	04 credits
Computer course	04 credits
Minor course or electives (from their own faculty or other faculties)	21 credits
Total	120 credits
Minimum requirement	120 credits

d) Bachelor of Science (Economy)

Pure science or applied science courses	29 credits
Management courses	09 credits
Theoretical and specialisation courses	66 credits
Elective courses (inclusive of 1 course to be chosen from Islamic Civilization I, or Religion as an Ideology and Civilization, or Ethics and Moral Values; 1 course from Islamic civilization II, or Philosophy of science and Human civilization)	18 credits
Total	122 credits
Minimum requirement	120 credits

The above analysis reveals several patterns:

1. All universities have general education components in their undergraduate programmes. They see general education as a desirable element, but the allocation time for this programme differs between Universities. General statement is difficult to make because different faculties, even from the same universities have different policy on this matter. Perhaps this is caused by the lack of understanding of what general education really is.
2. All the three universities organised general education in two ways:
 - i. on the basis of traditional disciplines like social sciences, natural sciences and the fine arts.
 - ii. on the basis of inter-disciplinary courses or themes (like the elective courses offered in the general studies programme at UKM)
3. The integration of general education in the curriculum differs slightly between universities. Even though all universities require their students to study general education in a variety of ways, most of them practice two procedures, namely *distribution requirement*, where students are required to take a minimum number of courses in several broad fields of studies and the *prescribed distribution* where the institutions dictates most of the requirements, with few electives (Boyer and Levine, 1983).
4. In all the three universities, students are required to take a blend of specified courses, guided options and a few electives. They have to take compulsory courses that usually consist of Islamic Civilization, Nationhood, English language and co-curricular activities. The requirement for elective courses are addressed differently, whereas UM and UPM have more compulsory elected courses, UKM students have more freedom in choosing preferred courses as long as they follow the “grouping requirement”.
5. All universities implement general education in their own style and do not seem to follow any particular model. What is obvious is that the style adopted is heavily influenced by American model of general education and the directive from the government to include Islamic Civilization and Nationhood as a compulsory subject in the undergraduate curriculum.

6. Almost all courses at the three universities (with the exception of compulsory courses and courses offered by Centre for General Studies in UKM) are not specially designed for a General Education Programme. They are mostly courses designed for students who specialise in those disciplines offered but at the introductory level. Thus we have courses like Principles of Organisational Management, Basic Statistic, Management, etc.
7. In the three universities students take general education courses throughout their three years study with a heavy concentration in the second year.
8. All universities have an abundance of general education courses. UKM alone has about 350 courses, but they are not specially designed for general education purpose. They are courses that the respective faculties considered “general” enough to be taken by “other” students.

PROBLEMS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

There are a number of problems faced by the three universities in conducting general education programmes. This section discusses only two of them namely, course content and delivery method.

What should be included in the general education programme? What is the balanced diet which can ensure a “healthy” product? Even though the Faculty catalogues list a large range of courses under general education, they are not properly planned. There is no integration and linkages; courses are often offered in isolation. As a result the students can only have a “grab bag” exposure throughout their programme. They take a range of courses but often could not see the connection between them.

Squires, in his book *The Curriculum Beyond School*, proposes a three dimensional model based on three approaches to general education that can be used as a framework in planning the content for general education programme. If knowledge is the chosen approach in planning and developing general education curriculum, one must ensure that the content of the curriculum introduces people to a complete range of knowledge. These include seven or eight domains namely mathematics, literature and the fine art, morals, religion and philosophy. Together, these comprise the primary means of understanding the world and they form the necessary basis for progression to higher levels of study. Culture has also been widely invoked as a guiding principle for the curriculum. Squires agrees that all cultures can be divided into eight structures or subsystem as follows:

- a. social structure/social system
- b. economic system
- c. communication system
- d. rationality system
- e. technology system
- f. morality system
- g. belief system
- h. aesthetic system

To omit any of these would be deprive the student and allow him only a partial induction to his social world.

In the last domain, researches identified five types of ability or skill that the school often claims to develop. These are cognitive-intellectual; aesthetic artistic; affective-emotional; physical-manual and personal-social. A general education, on this basis, is one that gives an adequate emphasis to each of these, rather than stressing one at the expense of others. Whichever basis is used for planning a general education knowledge, culture or abilities, these three aspects are always present. Some of the domains suggested above are already implemented by the three universities as are evident in courses such as moral, philosophy, communication, and social psychology but it is still not a comprehensive package.

Content alone is not enough to make for a good general education programme. How learning experience is organised and delivered is equally important. Large numbers of students with “chalk and talk” method of delivery can weaken a good programme with questionable outcome. A good general education programme should emphasise important developmental goals in students, namely “critical analysis and understanding of the world, our society, and ourselves” (Poremski, 1988). This can be achieved through creative and evaluative assignments, interaction and feedback from faculty, study visit, internship, independent research, team teaching and role play. The size of the class and the instructional method also play a very important role in general education. They can determine the interaction level between student and the lecturer. Smaller class will enable a high degree of interaction, also it will provide more time for lecturers to give adequate assignment and other activities.

In UKM, UPM and UM most general education classes are big and lessons are usually delivered through mass lecture. This is certainly not the best way to learn. Most of the lecturers are also reluctant to experiment with various methods. The emphasis has always been given to the content of the course rather than the method of teaching.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that general education is an important element in every educational system. It has a vital role in providing a base for a well-rounded human being. Malaysia emphasises its importance as reflected in the National Education Philosophy and in all the three universities which implement general education programmes as they see fit. Even though the success of this programme remains to be seen, current developments promise a bright future.

The Ministry of Education recently issued a directive for all public universities in Malaysia to include Islamic and Asian Civilization plus Nationhood in their undergraduate programme, and it is a compulsory course for all students. This is perhaps the beginning of some commonality in general education components among universities in Malaysia, but the possibilities for local universities to adopt the same model for general education programme is doubtful. The corporatisation of universities will leave each university with more freedom to determine the direction of their general education

in the future.

REFERENCES

- Boyer, E. Land Levine, A. 1983. *A Quest for Common Learning*. New York: Carnegie Foundation for the Advance of Teaching.
- Poremski, K.M. 1988. Liberal Learning Ideals Dominate Program., *Liberal Education*. 74 (1) January/February: 26
- Shen, P. 1974. Implementation of General Education: structures, principles, and problems. In Prachoom Chomchai (ed), *Curriculum reform with reference to general education in Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: ASAIHIL Secretariat, pp 96-108.
- Squire, G. 1987. *The Curriculum Beyond School*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia - Faculty catalogues for 1996/97 and 1997/ 98.
- Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia *Prospectus 1997/198*.
- University of Malaya - Faculty catalogues for 1996/97 and 1997/98.
- Universiti Pertanian Malaysia - faculty catalogues for 1996/97 and 1997/98.