

On General Education in Higher Education Institutions of China Mainland

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Abstract: This thesis points out the main problems consisting in general education in higher education institutions (HEIs) of China mainland. General education need to be further improved and so does the quality of general education curriculum. The faculty construction should be more reasonable; the teaching administration models and the evaluation system should also be perfected. This thesis is also aimed to put forward the countermeasures: to pay more attention to general education, improve the quality of the general education curriculum with every effort, develop the faculty urgently, ameliorate the teaching administration models and establish the scientific and proper evaluation system of general education curriculum, and so on.

Key words: general education; problems; countermeasures

At present, general education has been popularized comparatively in most HEIs in China mainland. It has become an important task for higher education reform that how to promote the university's general education and its in-depth development in China mainland. This thesis just discusses the existing problems and countermeasures to general education.

1. The Main Problems Consisting in General Education in HEIs of China Mainland Currently

1.1 General Education has been Ignored for a Long Time

Since 1998, after the document “**Opinions on Enhancing Undergraduates’ Cultural Quality Education**” drawn up by the Department of Higher Education under the Ministry of Education, the concept “general education” has been identified broadly in HEIs in China mainland as well as the “cultural quality education”. However, it doesn't mean that we have no need to intensify the consciousness of general education. To the contrary, the consciousness of the general education awaits to be enhanced and strengthened. There are three reasons in the following:

Firstly, in theory, with the promotion of the quality education, the quality of the students in middle and primary schools has improved constantly; therefore, the task of the university's general education seems to be lighter. In fact, it is not. At present, with the increase of the employment difficulty of the whole society, the test-oriented education in middle and primary schools has the evidence of rebound. It is difficult to spread the quality education in reality. Mr. Liu, Bin, the former vice-director of the National Education Committee, said when interviewed: “Test-oriented education is rebounding in large scale, such rebound, forceful and ferocious.”

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¹The rebound of the test-oriented education means that the quality education in middle and primary schools has been facing challenges, which will lead to arduous tasks for university's general education for a long time in the future. It's reported that, the star teacher Yan Ying who was working in Beijing No.14 Middle School once made a survey, finding out that among the senior students, 59.5% of them had not studied the geography in the first year and 2.3% of them had not studied the geography both in the first and second year in junior middle school. A respectable number of students couldn't read map and point out the locations of the continents, the oceans and nations of the world. A majority of geographic teachers of senior middle schools have a sense that their students almost have no geographic knowledge. In order to deal with the entrance examination for college, a lot of middle and primary schools don't offer courses like history, geography, fine arts, sociology, biography, etc, so a lot of students have not learned the basic knowledge of history, geography, sociology, and so on, as well as the basic principle of how to be an upright person. Therefore, the university's cultural quality education and general education still have a long way to go, and we shouldn't keep a slack hand.

Secondly, from the holistic circumstances of the HEIs to seeing, general education has been well carried out and enforced in some key institutions and comprehensive institutions whose bases of human culture and social science are preferable, while in some local institutions and the institutions which emphasize the sciences and engineering, the general education is still a remote dream. There is no condition like faculty to carry out general education in some institutions. The leaders of those institutions even have no consciousness to promote the general education. Therefore, the consensus propaganda for promoting the general education should be expanded and the consciousness of the general education needs to be enhanced.

Thirdly, from some HEIs whose general education has been well promoted to seeing, the consciousness of the general education still needs to be strengthened, or else people's enthusiasm to general education will be slipped and the promotion of general education will stagnate or even reverse. As Liu Bin, the vice-director, said, "Reformation is aimed to give up the extant and irrational things. If there is no continuous promoting force, the new-born things will be knocked over by the conventional forces who want to maintain the extant order. Continuous promotion needs consensus. If there is no consensus environment or the consensus environment is very weak, the test-oriented education certainly will rebound" The promotion of general education is like the same.

1.2 The Quality of General Education Curriculum Needs to be Improved

1.2.1 General education curriculum is considered as pedestrian curriculum

In most general education curriculum teachers' views, the general education curriculum means to introduce the separate discipline's basic knowledge simply, which makes most general education courses only stay at the stage of imparting knowledge, while the discipline spirit and methodology the curriculum embodies have not been aroused any recognition. The essentials of the general education are not only to impart the knowledge of multi-disciplines, what's more, it makes the students learn the methods to analyze and solve problems through multi-disciplines and multi-angles. Furthermore, a lot of teachers misconceive the general education curriculum as pedestrian curriculum presently, which is bad for improving the quality of the general education curriculum.

1.2.2 The general education curriculum screening is not strict, and its structure needs to be further optimized

At present, although many HEIs have offered a mass of general education courses according to the partition of discipline fields and students can select courses in different discipline fields, a lot of general education courses are nominal and never exist, or offered but going out of form. At the same time, many courses are offered on the basis of

¹ Hongya Hu & Bin Liu. Quality Education will Success in the End. People's Political Consultative Weekly, C1 Edition, 2005-2-2

teachers who will teach these courses. Each school or college encourages their own teachers to offer general education courses if they are willing to apply them. Therefore, the curriculum screening is not strict. Some colleges attach importance to the general education curriculum teaching and the teachers apply courses actively and their courses are offered a lot; while some are not active and the courses offered are only few; which make the general education curriculum structure seem reasonable, but actually not reasonable. For example, one College of Water Conservancy and Hydroelectric Engineering in a key university has offered about 20 general education courses, even exceeded some colleges of humanities and social science, but there is not even one recommended by the students.

1.2.3 The extent of difficulty or easiness for the general education curriculum content should be adjusted

At present, there are two inclinations to control the extent of difficulty or easiness for the general education curriculum content: first, as stated above, general education curriculum is considered as pedestrian curriculum, so it just introduces the basic knowledge of each discipline. The teaching contents are too easy, which makes the students feel that they could get the credits without any efforts. As a result, they never listen to the lectures earnestly or attend classes. Second, general education curriculum is apprehended as professional basic curriculum. The teaching contents are too difficult, ignoring the characteristics of the whole students. Especially some natural science courses offered by colleges of science and engineering are too difficult, which has become a main obstacle for liberal arts students to select. There are a lot of general education courses offered by colleges of science and engineering; however, merely the titles of the courses could scare the liberal arts students. For example, a College of Physics in a key university has offered a general education curriculum called '20th Century Physics', but a lot of liberal arts students said that they could never understand the content, so they just lay in during the class, which distressed both the teacher and the students. How to make the students who are not professional and have no professional bases be happy to listen to and understand such general education courses has become a problem for us to consider seriously.

1.3 The Faculty of the General Education Curriculum should be Enhanced Urgently

1.3.1 The faculty of the general education curriculum is deficient at large and the whole level needs to be improved urgently

It is difficult to put the general education into practice because request for teaching the general education curriculum is higher compared with that of professional education. It requires the teachers should have not only higher professional scientific attainments, but also broad knowledge, as well as the consciousness, methodology and ability to use different knowledge to analyze and solve problems. At present, there are few teachers who can reach such standards. Teachers who reach the standards are not always willing to offer general education curriculum. On the other hand, in choosing the faculty, each HEIs only put its attention on its own teaching resources, lacking in communication and cooperation with other HEIs as well as the introduction and use of the excellent people of our society. Therefore, in a word, the faculty of the general education curriculum is deficient seriously.

1.3.2 A part of general education curriculum teachers are lacking in enough cognition of the general education

They do not understand the essentials of the general education and their consciousness is also deficient. They just consider the general education as a commonsensible education which is not necessary to be taught in the university's class with special care. Therefore, their teaching enthusiasm is not strong and devotion is not enough. The general education is always an avocation or a part-time job.

1.3.3 The exchanges between teachers and students are not enough in the class

The liberal arts teachers on general education curriculum always plunge into self-inebriation situation, ignoring students' responses; while the science and engineering teachers easily consider the general education

curriculum as the professional curriculum, paying little attention to the characteristics of the students. In a word, it is a common phenomenon that the teachers always ignore communication and exchanges in the teaching process, which is also a leading reason influencing the teaching effects of the general education curriculum.

1.3.4 The expressive skills of the teachers on the general education curriculum are very weak

The expressive skills of the teachers on the general education curriculum of natural science, especially on the engineering are very weak, which influences the promotion of the general education curriculum of natural science. Some teachers on engineering course are obviously lacking of expressive skills when teaching the students of the whole institution (even the PhD supervisors, a considerable number of whom need to enhance the expressive skills training), so the students feel disinteresting on the class; what's more, the general education curriculum of natural science is too difficult, which leads to the decline of the attraction of the general education curriculum of natural science, as well as the promotion.

1.4 The Teaching Administration Models of the General Education Curriculum Needs to be Ameliorated

1.4.1 The work of the teaching administration of the general education curriculum is lacking of go-aheadism

Although almost all the students have realized that they should supplement some knowledge they never learned before and acquaint themselves with other discipline fields and perfect their knowledge structure, most of them do not understand the essentials of the general education. Many students even consider the general education curriculum as English, computer, PE and so on which are required courses that every student is asked to learn, while elective courses are not general education curriculum. They think that the elective courses could be elected freely according to their interests. Such sciolism to the essentials of the general education certainly will affect the exertion of the students as principal part and active devotion to learning the general education curriculum, which will affect the implementary impact of the general education curriculum. In addition, due to the lack of instructing the students to elect the courses, there are many students electing the courses with credits high or easy to get, such as music, fine arts and so on; while there are few students electing the courses with credits low or difficult to get, like the natural science courses. Therefore, the thoughts, idea, and the essentials of the general education, and how to elect the general education curriculum, should be included in the students' entrance education. The department of the general education curriculum administration should do the work actively.

1.4.2 The teaching administration of the general education curriculum is not strict and the request for the students is very low, which make the credits are easy to get

Because of most tests of the general education courses are easy to pass, a considerable number of students do not listen to the class seriously. Some of them recite English words; some read irrelative books; some write letters and do professional homework and so on. In a word, there are few students taking notes; some students even do not take notebook or pen. The exercises of many humanistic and social science courses are obviously finished by scrabbling up or sticking related materials, but the students who have elected the courses get the credits successfully.

1.4.3 The executors who carry out the general education are lacking of communication

Many institutions only undertake macro-instruction on the setting of the general education curriculum, pursuing sweeping and comprehensiveness. The university transfers the power to lower levels—each school or college, then colleges or schools can offer relevant courses and teachers according to its own discipline scope. But the university, colleges and teachers are lacking of communication for the fixed general education courses and scientific argumentation on practical feasibility, which makes some courses just exist and the teaching aim is difficult to realize.

1.4.4 The mechanism for supervising and restricting the implementation of the general education curriculum is very short

Although many institutions have special organizations for charging the general education curriculum, the functions of such organizations are only to make curriculum schedule at the beginning of the semester, to select the teachers, and to arrange the examinations at the end of the semester. But the work on tracing and investment during the implementation, feedback of the effect of the implementation and the adjustment of the plan of curriculum and other microcosmic aspects is done little. It makes the general education in higher institutions be present only with curriculum having no effect. It seems that many institutions simply consider the implementation of the general education as the setting of general education curriculum. The task of the general education has been apparently completed since the curriculum system is established. No department cares for whether the curriculum system is reasonable, feasible or not and how the implementation of the general education curriculum is. It shows that the administration system of the general education curriculum is not as clear as a bell and lacking of the mechanism for supervising and restricting.

1.5 The Evaluation System of the General Education Curriculum Awaits to be Perfected

At present, almost all higher education institutions do not establish the evaluation system of the general education curriculum. As a result, they use same standards, measures and methodologies to evaluate the general education curriculum and other courses. In fact, the general education curriculum has its own features. It takes more time to train the students' thinking methodology and cultivate their humanistic spirits. In addition, the effect is not only slow, but also not easy to be seen and measured. Therefore, we should not make decisions too early when evaluating the general education curriculum; instead, we should take various kinds of evaluating methodology, measures and multiple standards to evaluate the courses scientifically.

2. The Countermeasures to the General Education

2.1 Pay More Attention to General Education

The implementation of the general education is a difficult thing, it can not accomplish in an action. The promotion of the general education is a long journey, not a short-term action. Therefore, for the work of the general education, it is a long way for us to go. Firstly, the educational governing departments should expand the consensus propaganda for the general education and the graduates' cultural quality education continuously and promote their development. "The new things are born out of the old things; although they represent the future, they are puny and easily jugulated by the old things if there is no support, protection and spark plug"². At the same time, the educational governing departments also should put forward the striving direction of the general education and organize proseminars about general education frequently in order to boost the in-depth development of the general education reformation. Secondly, we should enhance the general consciousness of the leaders and teachers in higher education institutions. None but the leaders have consciousness and whole teachers are resonant; recognize their responsibilities and fling themselves into the reform of the general education that the general education reform could get actual effect. Currently, many HEIs promote the general education reform without discussion throughout the whole institutions. And a lot of leaders and teachers have no resonant cognition to the idea of general education; some teachers are even not clear to the concept and the aim of the general education. In such situation, the quality of the general education is certainly inferior and formalistic and we can never realize

² Hongya Hu & Bin Liu. Quality Education will Success in the End. People's Political Consultative Weekly, C1 Edition, 2005-2-2

the aim. Therefore, we should continue to discuss the idea of the general education in depth and enhance the consciousness of the general education.

2.2 Improve the Quality of the General Education with Every Effort

Firstly, establish scientific, reasonable and feasible general education curriculum system. Such system means the knowledge distribution of each discipline field is reasonable and makes the students learn them well, not just putting on the airs. In addition, the higher educational institutions should develop school-based general education curriculum that can embody its discipline predominance and features.

Secondly, plan the contents of the general education curriculum elaborately. As the characteristics are too different between the general education curriculum and professional curriculum, their teaching aims are different even referring to the same knowledge scope. Therefore, we should plan the contents of the general education curriculum according to the characteristics of the disciplines and consider whether the contents should be taught much, little or not elaborately.

Thirdly, explore a multi-type, multi-form and effective organization mode of the general education curriculum. For the courses involving broad discipline scope and large capacity of knowledge, we can organize a series of courses according to topics and discipline scopes; while other courses, we can offer them by one or several lectures. In this way, it can not only save teaching time, but also improve the teaching effect. For instance, some difficult courses on natural science, which involve broad discipline scope, can be organized according to topics and taught in parts by teachers who are professional in that part. The effect will be better if the problems are analyzed by teachers with different discipline backgrounds than by a professional teacher through the whole discipline fields. Some courses closing to life can be taught in lectures with less time.

Fourthly, Use courseware properly to improve the teaching effect. Courseware with high quality can help the students understand the contents visually. However, the courseware is only an assistant instrument for teaching, teachers should use it properly. Many teachers on general education curriculum make the courseware replace their teaching, so they just read the content in the courseware without any enthusiasm on the class, which is called “forged tone” by the students. In this way, courseware can not consolidate the teaching effect; instead, it will reduce the teaching quality.

Fifthly, ameliorate teaching methodology of the general education curriculum. As students usually seldom learn the contents of the general education curriculum, it is difficult for them to listen to and understand them. Therefore, in order to improve the teaching effect, we must consider the teaching methodology and students’ knowledge backgrounds, know the students’ psychological characteristics, study the teaching arts and strengthen the interest and accessibility of the curriculum seriously.

2.3 Enhance the Faculty Construction of General Education Curriculum

The level of the general education in a university lies on whether it has a set of high-quality teachers. Thereby, in order to improve the quality of the general education, the first step is to do the work on faculty construction of general education curriculum.

2.3.1 Pay attention to the faculty election of general education curriculum

The general education curriculum is valuable for its feature---“general knowledge”. Hence, we should try our best to elect senior teachers with comparative academic accomplishment, abundant teaching experience and broad view to open general education curriculum. The methods for electing teachers are in the following: be recommended by the fellows in the same discipline field; mount teaching through competition; teach one or several lessons openly and then let the students to elect. Make sure that teachers with real academic accomplishment,

teaching enthusiasm and proficient teaching skills go to the platform to teach general education curriculum.

2.3.2 Strengthen the faculty rundle construction of the general education curriculum

On one hand, we should propose famous experts to teach general education curriculum; on the other hand, we should also cultivate mothball force and encourage the outstanding and young teachers to offer general education curriculum, as well as organize them to view and emulate the teaching of general education curriculum taught by famous teachers and assimilate their experience throughout the institutions and overseas to improve the teaching level of general education curriculum actually.

2.3.3 Arrange general education experts to offer related lectures in different discipline fields

Higher education institutions should arrange general education experts to offer related lectures in different discipline fields for the teachers on general education curriculum. The aim is to make the teachers understand the essentials and aim of the general education deeper and help every teacher to fix on teaching aims and plans suiting to the curriculum features.

2.3.4 Encourage teachers to take part in the academic proseminars actively

In order to improve their general education consciousness, teaching skills and teaching level, higher education institutions should encourage teachers to take part in the academic proseminars actively.

2.4 Ameliorate the Teaching Administration Models of the General Education Curriculum

2.4.1 Enhance the instructions of electing the general education courses

In order to avoid the blindness, the administrative department of the general education curriculum should cooperate with the colleges and schools to assign teachers with rich experience to instruct students to elect courses according to their own situations. In 1871, Noah Porter, the president of Yale University condemned the election system at that time in his accession address, saying that the students are immature without necessary sense ability, as well as they are also lacking of guidance, so they can not make mature choices. Some students always elect easy courses avoiding difficult ones, so the courses elected have no whole structure among themselves. Such phenomenon exists popularly in higher education institutions. Therefore, we should emphasize the propaganda and promotion of every course. That is to say, let the students not only know but also understand the basic circs of the courses, such as teaching aim, discipline objectives, discipline arrangement, teacher introduction, whether it needs related knowledge bases and so on (not only the class amount, time, place, teachers' names offered at present). Make sure that students elect the courses according to the courses synopsis and their knowledge structure, interest, specialized needs and so on. For having the instruction of the teachers, the students' blindness certainly will be reduced. At the same time, as the students have some preparations, it will be good for the teachers' teaching plans to carry through.

In addition, institutions should adjust the credits of the general education curriculum momentarily according to the practical situations. Like reducing the credits of fine arts or increasing the credits of natural science curriculum in order to attract the liberal arts students to elect, etc.

2.4.2 Hold symposiums on teaching of general education curriculum periodically

It is good for improving the teaching quality through organizing a small-scale symposium when finishing a course. The members of the symposium consist of teachers on general education curriculum, experts on some discipline field, liberal arts and science student representatives, the teaching administration department and experts on general education curriculum. That is to say, it includes the organizers, the main-bodies of teaching process and the carriers of the course implementation who will discuss the effect and deficiencies of the course. The aim is to put forward concrete measures for ameliorating the curriculum implementation during the next period.

2.5 Establish Scientific and Reasonable Evaluation System of the General Education Curriculum

2.5.1 The evaluation system of the general education curriculum should be diversiform

Take evaluation methods and measures as many as possible and use multiple, multidimensional evaluation standards to evaluate the general education curriculum scientifically according to the features of the curriculum, Like holding symposiums and using formative evaluation to evaluate the general education curriculum. The scholars on general education and governors should attend lectures and discuss with students frequently in order to summarize the mental effect the students gained from the curriculum through using the knowledge of pedagogy and psychology, combining with the students' former knowledge structures and specialty features and analyzing the notes of the discussions; instead of evaluating the teaching effect of the general education curriculum through the tests of the related knowledge the students have mastered.

2.5.2 Use modern measures and internet to evaluate the general education curriculum

It is cost-effective and efficient to use the campus internet to evaluate the general education curriculum. Therefore, we should make full use of the campus BBS platform via offering a space on "general education" to attract teachers and students to participate the evaluation. Collect teaching information fed back through the discussions of teachers and students which is used as reference for adjusting the implementation plan and amelioration of the general education curriculum in the following period.

References (omitted)

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(continued from Page 18)

And you waltzed away from me [different relationships]
Now my arms feel so empty as I gaze around the floor [education shouldn't be a lonely business]
And I'll keep on changing partners [trial and errors]
Till I hold you once more [sparkles and innovations]
Though we danced for one moment and too soon we had to part
In that wonderful moment something happened to my heart
So I'll keep changing partners till you're in my arms and then
Oh, my darling' I will never change partners again
Though we danced for one moment and too soon we had to part
In that wonderful moment something happened to my heart
So I'll keep changing partners till you're in my arms and then
Oh, my darling' I will never change partners again.

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