

## The Clarification to the Misapprehension on General Education

ZHOU Juan, CHEN Wen-jin

(Wuhan University, Wuhan, Hubei 430072, P. R. China)

**Abstract:** It's a trend that many countries over the world try their best to enhance General Education in order to actualize educational reform in higher education. This paper clarifies eight misapprehensions about General Education from its meaning, content and the relationship with Specialized Education in the hope of having correct understandings to General Education and making its effect on higher educational reform.

**Key words:** General Education (GE); Specialized Education (SE); Misapprehension

At present, those who engage in research or practice about higher education pay much attention on GE. A great number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) carried out GE in order to rectify the abuse of SE, and cultivate successors who are well developed morally, intellectually and physically. In fact, they just followed others blindly, even regarded GE as embellishment for SE. The reason is really lacking correct understanding about the base features of GE. To clarify those misapprehensions about GE is helpful to promote the higher educational reform.

### 1. The 1<sup>st</sup> Misapprehension: GE is Liberal Education (LE)

LE also can be regarded as “learned education” or “liberal arts education”. Aristotle said that LE is a kind of education which promotes human's wise, morality and body to develop harmoniously by exploring our sense, and prepares for sharing “leisure”, “pondering”. It excludes any practical purposes making preparations for certain jobs, but just be good for rational thinking and objective truth. Renaissance endowed LE the meaning of “classical liberty education”; with the development of natural science in 19<sup>th</sup> century, T. H. Huxley, a biologist, thought LE as “education including both liberty and science”.<sup>[1]</sup>

In 1829, A. S. Packard first brought forward “GE”, “which is a classical, liberal, scientific and comprehensive education. It helps students to understand any knowledge.”<sup>[2]</sup> GE equips generally all students universal education in the purpose of training students to develop freely and harmoniously in personality and knowledge, intellect and sensibility, body and mind.

Both GE and LE believe that higher education should give students essential and comprehensive education that helps us to understand the world, society and ourselves. However, GE inherited and developed certain spirits from LE but discard others. It absorbed the core that LE attaches importance to develop human nature, but abandoned its parochialism serving just fewness. GE cannot simply be regarded as LE, and GE should be considered as a method of organization about LE. It contains two aspects: first, it indicates that students should master some basic knowledge and abilities except our specialties; second, it aims to make each scattered subject a

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ZHOU Juan, postgraduate of School of Education Science, Wuhan University; research field: education administration.

CHEN Wen-jin, associate professor of School of Education Science, Wuhan University; research fields: HR Management & Education economics.

meaningful whole when all subjects are in the state of polarization.<sup>[3]</sup>

## **2. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Misapprehension: Actualizing GE is to Offer GE Curriculums**

GE is firstly an idea of education in order to cultivate well-developed students in all aspects. It needs to draw a corresponding system and take certain means to realize its aim. GE curriculum is one of those means. As a carrier or intermediate, GE curriculum is a plenary condition but not a necessary condition. Other means, such as lectures, academy communications, social research, social practices and cultural activities at campus, are also good measures to carry out GE.

GE is not only related with curriculum, but the teaching ways and circumstance. John Henry Newman, an educationalist in 19<sup>th</sup> century, said that the essence of a university is a place where people from all over the country can communicate with each other and all kinds of thoughts can spread freely. What GE gives students is not only knowledge but also wise; what GE appeals to students is not only intellect but also sensibilities and faith. So, its carriers are word, sound and picture also some recessive elements.<sup>[4]</sup> GE in HEIs cannot be off harmonious relationship between teachers and students, beautiful campus, lively cultural life and good teachers.

Furthermore, actualizing GE cannot only be in HEIs, but in the whole society. TV programs, like “science and technology overview” and “animal world”, give us science or biology knowledge. In a word, GE can be actualized through extensive forms and approaches.

## **3. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Misapprehension: GE Courses are Common Courses and Elective Courses**

From the form of GE curriculum, school-wide common courses and elective courses are the most familiar forms. However, whatever common courses or elective courses, both are the kinds of subjects and the executable forms. They have nothing of the aims and content of curriculum.<sup>[5]</sup> Maybe GE curriculum needs to be actualized by common courses and elective courses, but it doesn't mean GE courses are common courses and elective courses. Judging GE course is the aim rather than the form. Otherwise, the aim of GE cannot come true because of the separation between aims and content.

We cannot simply pursue similar curriculum structure with other countries during the process of GE reform in our HEIs. The core of higher education is still SE. The real aim of elective courses is just to develop discipline caliber and increase employment opportunities. This is far away from the aim of promoting knowledge structure conformity, improving students' comprehensive abilities. We could give students more knowledge and advance their skills not only by common courses and elective courses, but also by specialty courses. As the soul of higher education, GE should run through the whole process of higher education and touch upon all round.

## **4. The 4<sup>th</sup> Misapprehension: GE is Humanistic Education**

In a long time, we attach more importance to science while less to arts in higher education, which leads to pay less attention to humanistic education. At the same time, our general education reform is just simply to append some courses like literature enjoying, art appreciation and so on. On general education, many people would immediately think of humanistic education, which is a distorted understanding of GE. The aim of humanistic education is to cultivate students with moral sentiment, social responsibilities and healthy souls. GE contains above requirements and qualities but not only these. In other words, Humanistic education is just a part of GE, not be equipollent.

First, humanistic education is to impart knowledge of humanities, which is composing the content of higher education with social and nature science. GE contains not only classical literature, history and philosophy, but also social science and nature science. Second, one aim of GE is to have a general and all-round understanding to human knowledge. If we thought that GE is humanistic education, the integrality of knowledge structure would be broken. It would be unpractical to foster phoenix with intact personality under fragmentary knowledge structure.

### **5. The 5<sup>th</sup> Misapprehension: The Content of GE should not be Practical**

“As the idea of higher education, GE is beyond the utilitarian philosophy, promoting humanistic and scientific spirit. GE gives students non-professional, non-utilitarian but basic knowledge, abilities, attitudes and values in order to cultivate harmoniously developed persons who are gracious, healthy in both body and mind, elegant and erudite.” It appears that the content of GE should be something kindhearted, humanistic, nice and virtuous, but not anything professional, vocational and practical.<sup>[6]</sup> In fact, people who own this opinion is superficial and narrow. GE is not learned education; not to regard human knowledge, wise and culture tradition as the ornament of life; and not to train rich idler but those who can use knowledge and attitude to solve practical problems.

The unique about the U.S. higher education institution is “land-grant college”. This tradition made “serving society”, “educational equality” being an important component of education idea. Universities and colleges are responsible for giving people practical knowledge and citizen skills to meet social the need of industrialization and democratization. According to this idea, “practical and equal” became the core value of higher education; “practical knowledge and citizen skills” is the important content of GE.<sup>[7]</sup>

### **6. The 6<sup>th</sup> Misapprehension: GE is the Base of SE**

Generally speaking, GE courses are given in the first two years of college, and SE in the last two years. It leads to the simplistic view that GE is the base of SE. GE courses are face to all students, and the content is general and abroad. GE courses people know are not the whole GE courses but one part of them. So, the connotation and scope of GE is profounder and wider than professional education. Just a few parts of GE courses are the base of SE.

Besides, the well development cannot come true in two or three years through several subjects. From the view of lifelong education, GE should run through people’s whole lives, from elementary and secondary school education, family education and continuing education, even daily life, people’s communication and all activities connecting with human, nature and society. All of these are the elements of GE. GE in higher education is not only in the first two years but also in the whole college life; not only in a period of college learning but also in their whole lives.

### **7. The 7<sup>th</sup> Misapprehension: GE is Opposite to SE**

All GE activities are involved in “human being”, such as people’s development, socialization and perfect personality. All knowledge is good to human or people’s survival and development should be chosen. Because people’s development shows a “harmonious” spirit, the knowledge meeting GE’s requirement must be general and comprehensive.<sup>[5]</sup>

SE whose base is specialty and profession attaches importance on “specialty and profession”, such as intensive knowledge, professional knowledge structure and differentiation of specialty. Because specialty

development requires that knowledge must be professional and intensive, only the knowledge related closely with current specialty could be chosen, which results in ignoring other knowledge in other fields.<sup>[5]</sup>

Though GE and SE have different springboard, they are not opposite. GE bases itself upon the origin of education; SE is a side, a way or means of education. They belong to different level. If we reviewed them from the origin of education, we could find that they are consistent because they have the same purpose to explore individuals' abilities and career development.

### **8. The 8<sup>th</sup> Misapprehension: GE cannot Cultivate such Successors Who are Well-developed**

As the special institutions cultivating advanced successors, HEIs meet with the social development to divide the work of education and academy research according to the branches of subjects and social polarization. So SE in HEIs is reasonable and inevitable. Moreover, the creations, spreading and applications of science and technology will require people to have more and intensive professional knowledge in future because high, professional and top science and technology have important effect on economy development. People's professional knowledge and abilities become more and more important. We cannot negative the function of SE only for over laden specialization causing people's unilateral development; also not believe that GE cannot cultivate such successors who are well developed morally, intellectually and physically.

Higher education contains an interesting "absurdity": University achieves the destination of GE by professional education.<sup>[6]</sup> Discipline education or specialized education is not to teach every student to get "craft" but the professional ways of thinking in certain fields, independent personality and value animadverting consciousness. SE is so important in higher education not only because of the importance of learning and groping specialty knowledge, but also the importance of fostering and edifying academy spirit in the process of learning. A defaulting professor will train negligent students, even those who plagiarize. In this sense, one part of the content and purpose of GE—fostering students' spirit of awing and devoting for academy, come true by high-level specialized education.

In addition, lots of GE courses themselves in some HEIs are "disquisitive or research" to some extent.<sup>[8]</sup> It means that these courses should be given by some professors who research on the subject a lot, and students who take them as elective courses should take part in the research with professional attitudes. Otherwise, it's skimble-skamble to learn and study them. Hereby, if each student have respective specialty first, among whom excellent ones are chosen out, then enter a certain "liberal and art college" receiving another specialty education in new ways, we can also cultivate general outstanding persons.

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