

General Education in the Undergraduate Programme: Malaysian Policy Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

As the pace of industrialisation gathers momentum, the importance of education has been invariably pushed to the forefront, particularly during the last two decades, in Malaysia's development thrust. It has become more apparent with the Vision 2020 long-term objectives in which education is perceived as a critical instrument in achieving the nation's vision of attaining the status of a fully developed nation. Education is therefore seen as an enabling mechanism so that every Malaysian citizen will have an excellent command of knowledge, skills and values necessary in a world that has become increasingly competitive and globalised, arising from the impact of rapid and multifaceted development in science, technology and information flows.

While there is a need for universities to ensure that their programmes in all disciplines are continuously reviewed and upgraded. It is equally pertinent that general education, as it is now conducted be examined in the light of the above mentioned changing scenario. There is a broad consensus that general education is an important component of tertiary education in Malaysia. Although it is indeed timely that we re-examine its aims and its content to ensure that it is more focused and conducted objectively. In this light, this paper will at the outset relate the national education philosophy and the role of the higher education sector. Given that education is a process of continuous learning, the paper will also examine the synergy between what general education means at the pre-university level and the student input when he joins the university. An important part of this paper is to assess the structure of general education and perhaps outline some broad approaches which should enhance the student's potential at the undergraduate level.

NATIONAL EDUCATION PHILOSOPHY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

At the apex of the education system, higher education ought to play an increasingly important role in inculcating a culture of academic excellence encompassing the academic and undergraduate community, while functioning as a conduit to meet the manpower requirements of the nation. In this context, it would not necessarily entail just the supply of technically and professionally trained people needed in the various industries or sectors. But more importantly, the culture of academic excellence must be reinforced at all levels of the academic community.

It is for this purpose that the structure of any university program is indeed very critical. Therefore the distribution of the core courses, on the one hand, and the university, elective or liberal courses on the other is of great importance. At the undergraduate level, the teaching of general education is perceived to be an integral part of the student's educational experience for a period of at least three years. However, the process of education, including the one offered at the institutions of higher learning, must also take into cognizance of the country's national education philosophy which is expressed as follows:

Education in Malaysia is an ongoing 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 a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large.

In this light, the role of all levels of education from the pre-school to upper secondary school is indeed pertinent towards ensuring that the child will be nurtured to achieve the principal underpinnings of Malaysia's citizenry. The combination of subjects, curriculum and subject matters taught at both the primary and secondary levels must reflect this philosophy. At the same time the delivery system, a crucial component of education, must be effectively geared towards this need; or otherwise, as experience has shown, remedial mechanisms have to be instituted at the tertiary level. If this happens, then we may be tempted to conclude, perhaps wrongly, that the education system at the pre-university level fails to produce the students who ought to be knowledgeable, competent and having high moral and ethical values.

The burden will then fall on tertiary education to *reeducate* the product of the school system. It will indeed be a constraint for the university system to do this as tertiary education will have to focus on higher order skills so that rote learning will have less and less premium and will have to give way to creative, analytical and innovative thinking. It is also for this reason that university education should be more focused.

LINKING GENERAL STUDIES AT PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

Prior to becoming a university student, the same student is also subjected to a similar concept of general education allowing him to be prepared for an undergraduate program. General studies at the STPM level, for instance, pursues the objective of:

... mengembangkan dan meningkatkan kefahaman, kematangan berfikir, dan keberkesanan penyampaian dalam pelbagai bentuk komunikasi pada tahap pos menengah dan prauniversiti. (... developing and improving understanding, maturity of thoughts, effective delivery in various forms of communication at the post-secondary and pre-university level-Eds).

In fact, the above shows that, at least in theory, the student on entry at the university level is already equipped with the necessary intellectual skills. Similarly, under the Matriculation Programme of Maktab Perguruan Ilmu Khas (Specialist Teachers Training College), a course on *World Studies* is similarly structured and "designed to promote enquiry into a number of themes and topics relevant to conflict, modernisation, industrialisation and the environment". The course also aims to:

- i. develop analytical and critical thinking;
- ii. encourage students to read widely from newspapers, journals and other relevant material of current events; and
- iii. develop information gathering skills

However, as is often the case, issues have been raised on the quality of students entering their first year at the universities. If the students are perceived to be inadequate intellectually

one then has to ask whether the existing scope of general studies is relevant and appropriate for pre-university students. Likewise, at the undergraduate level in all local universities', general education is structured in the same manner as the above while concentrating on three core groups of courses:

- i. Ethical and religious values and Malaysian history;
- ii. Quantitative and Communication skills; and
- iii. Breadth of knowledge.

The courses to be taken by students in local universities are distributed into two main thrusts to ensure proficiencies and distribution amongst the disciplines. As such, when we examine closely, there is little difference between what a student learns in general studies both at the pre-university and university levels, especially in terms of the achieved. The difference may perhaps be linked to the greater breadth and depth of knowledge at the university level. If this is the case, then we must assume that there is a *continuity of purpose* as well as a close link between curriculum development of general studies at both the pre-university and university levels.

BALANCED EDUCATION VERSUS SPECIALISATION: WHOSE ROLE?

General education, at the undergraduate level, is concerned with the breadth and balance of learning, and with the versatility that comes with proficiency in intellectual skills that have universal application. General education should develop each student's knowledge, capacity for expression and response, the ability to communicate effectively, and critical insight to help the student become a capable, well informed and responsible citizen. To this end the institution of higher learning's general education programme aims to improve the student's competence in a wide range of knowledge and language, both oral and written, and to foster the will and ability to think clearly, critically, reflectively, and with as much precision as the subject allows.

General education also seeks to extend the undergraduate learning experience beyond particular academic or professional concentrations. It aims to acquaint the student with essential subject matter and methods of knowing in arts and humanities, the social and behavioral science, mathematics, and the natural (including) applied science. Moreover, it aims to enable the student to use technology appropriately, and to understand the values of individual health, fitness and well-being. These aims are based on the belief that such learning enriches human experience and foster understanding of oneself and the society in which he lives.

In line with the National Education Policy an individual pursuing a first degree course in any of the local universities ought to receive a broad and balanced education while specialising in his chosen discipline. The individual has to acquire an intellectual capacity with a reasonable level of communicative and articulative skills that are applicable across a wide range of general knowledge as well as acquiring those specialized skills appropriate to his discipline. An important issue at this point is whether the school system has achieved the planned objectives for its general studies program. But ironically this programme has also been extended to the university level.

For this reason, an institution of higher education is thus required to institute structured plans of study leading towards both specialized and general education. While general study is perceived to be desirable at the university level, one may also ask whether we are creating a

dualistic structure in which it is taught at the local universities, while Malaysian students who continue their undergraduate studies overseas are not subjected to this requirement. On the other hand, students pursuing their tertiary education at private universities and under twinning programs are required to take Malaysian Studies, although its content may differ from the general education as understood in local public universities.

Unlike general education, the primary objective of specialised education is to ensure a detailed and specific competence in techniques and subject matter through a study programme comprising a number of courses taught by academics to facilitate the creation of an individual with a set of skills and abilities as well as information-gathering capacity usually shaped by specific job demand and descriptions.

With an increasingly globalised economy and the increasing importance of the market-place in the economy worldwide, the need for highly trained and specialised manpower has become more critical as Malaysia forges ahead with its industrialisation programme.

The supply of university graduates to match the manpower needs of the country is now critically important such that the output of graduates has now been skewed towards professional courses as well the engineering and technology-based disciplines. The school system, as the present human resource development program entails, must be tailored to these needs so that 60 percent of student enrollment within a ten-year framework will be in the science and technology-based faculties as opposed to 40 percent in the arts stream. To a large extent this will substantially depend upon the output of excellent science students from the school system.

Its specialization is the new thrust of university's role with respect to the supply of graduates, how is the university to reconcile this paradox; i.e. balancing between the need to nurture students who are specialised in their core discipline and those who have a wide breadth of knowledge or intellectual capability. There is little doubt that students are capable of choosing what is best for them; and because of this, they tend to spend less time and do not give much focus towards general studies. The majority of students will graduate and are generally set to be employed in their field of specialization equipped with the expertise that they acquire from their core courses. In this light, it is thus pertinent that the school system responds to the national education philosophy as stated earlier. Fundamentally, this means that the student's ability to be knowledgeable, competent and in possession of high moral standards etc., must have its beginnings at the school level.

It is not the function of university education to replicate many of the things that ought to be taught at school. While it is important for a university student to have a wide breadth of knowledge as well as a sense of critical thinking, it is equally important that the ability to be inquisitive be acquired while he is within the school system; even more so in the upper secondary school. This trait is also an important pre-requisite for a student to develop an innovative capacity. Thus, the student must be able to read widely even when he is at the school level: covering many areas of knowledge, current affairs and perhaps literature. Acquiring the habit of reading should be constantly reinforced within the school system.

To complement these traits, the student must have the ability to communicate and articulate his views or opinions not only on matters that are of interest to him but also on

subjects that are the concern of his community, his nation etc. In an appropriate school environment, these traits can be positively nurtured at the school level so that when he enters the university, he is at ease with the new academic environment. Given the possibility that teaching method at the school are not interactive and may often be teacher-centred rather than student-centred, then the student's ability to communicate and articulate may not be realised to the fullest. The danger is that this disadvantage often persists in the university.

An important element in this context is the effectiveness of teaching method which is associated with factors such as class-size and teacher-student relationship in schools. While acquiring the above abilities is also important aspect of campus life, apart from *gaining the essential knowledge* in the student's area of specialisation or discipline, this can be further reinforced when the student goes through his university education. For this reason, it also important that the thrust of university education be reassessed with respect to its general education curriculum.

The order to communicate the articulate effectively, the *mastery of language*, both oral and written, is also critical. Again the school has to play an important role in this aspect. While Bahasa Melayu is the national language and principal medium of communication and every Malaysian citizen must be able to communicate and master the language, it is also of importance that a student is able to have a good command of the English language. At this stage, this language is widely used for global communications apart from the fact that documented or written knowledge is also dominated by the English language.

In this context, it is thus important that the teaching of English ought to be the responsibility of the school system. English as being taught at the university level seems to be remedial in nature; and at the end of the day, may not produce the desired results. Therefore it is timely that this process be reviewed so that the burden of upgrading the student's ability in this language can be taken away from the university. The delivery system at the school level ought be upgraded so that the university's resources can be reutilize in fulfilment of its core functions.

Reassessing general education at the university level must also be seen in the wider context of democratisation of education at the tertiary level. As a greater number of students is increasingly exposed to university education and their opportunities for admission into universities are substantially increased, university education is now not as elitist as it used to be. The recent increases in university enrolment and the mushrooming of private colleges and twinning programmes with overseas universities have further enhanced the possibilities for higher education. This situation in itself creates a dilemma for the existing universities as it also affects student- lecturer ratios infrastructure facilities and budget allocations.

It has important implications on the conduct of many courses or classes; and thus, in some sense, the quality of teaching for both specialised courses and general education could be affected. This calls for a reassessment of the general studies programme at both the university and pre-university level at the macro-level, since the need for additional infrastructure and academic recruitment have become more urgent.

Within a more liberalised environment in higher education with greater participation of the private sector (in particular, the new universities established by PETRONAS, TENAGA and Telekom Malaysia), similar issues need to be examined. As implied earlier, one may ask

whether the conduct of general education by them is comparable to the one conducted by the public universities.

Likewise, the shortening of the undergraduate program recently from four to three years in almost all university courses will have important repercussions on curriculum development, teaching methods, weekly contact hours; and of course, the conduct of general education itself.

In this respect, it is also critical that standards and the quality of tertiary education be maintained, if not enhanced, in the years to come. For this purpose, it is incumbent upon the academic community to review the whole spectrum of general education as currently conducted at the university level. At the same time, we must also recognise that only a small minority of university students, upon graduation, will become intellectuals or academics. If the postgraduate enrolment is any indicator, only about 10 percent of total student enrolment in our universities is undertaking postgraduate studies. Even then, a much smaller percentage will finish their studies. The majority of undergraduates will enter the market place and become knowledge-based workers, professing expertise in their areas of specialisation and disciplines. It is also for this reason that general education ought to be reviewed with the view to link it more closely with the changing scenario in human resource development.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Given the many recent changes in terms of Malaysia's economic performance affecting our human resource development, the overall education system must also respond with new approaches so that the potential of our youth can be fully tapped. The education system, of which higher education is a critical component, ought to be transformed so that a student's capability is continuously enhanced through his awareness of his responsibility towards society and his potential to seek new knowledge.

This would also include facilitating the acquisition of appropriate personal and social skills, a positive self-image, articulation capability and a life-long learning ability. In the final analysis, it is the student's learning experience at the university that is of critical importance in the development of his intellectual potential. Thus, the campus environment which will include both the academic and non-academic variables will have an important influence on such experience.

It is for this purpose that university general education, in terms of its objectives and curriculum, must be reviewed; and equally important, to link it with general studies at the pre-university level. It is important that duplication be minimised and compartmentalisation that exists between curriculum development at the secondary school level and university level be avoided. Consolidation and interaction between the two in terms of general education must be an important agenda for the future.

¹ For instance, according to the Centre for General Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, general studies means "a programme offered at the undergraduate level with the aim of providing students living skills in modern society. This includes an understanding of noble values, an appreciation of history and responsibilities in society; knowledge of quantitative analysis and communication techniques: art appreciation and the capacity to use leisure time productivity".