Mission of General Education and “CUHK Model”

Since its inception in 1963, The Chinese University of Hong Kong has, apart from striving to train specialized experts to serve society, set much store on the development of general education. As a modern university in a modern metropolis, CUHK has assimilated the Chinese tradition of “humanism” and the Western tradition of “liberal education”. For this reason, although the constitutional and academic structure of the University has undergone several changes, the authorities have never swerved from their determination to provide opportunities for students to reach out to the world beyond their major subject, understand issues of concern to other disciplines, reflect on problems and find solutions to them; as well as to encourage students to take the initiative to investigate and conduct research, to enhance their faculties of rational inquiry and analysis. In short, the aim is to help students develop a balanced personality – intellectually and emotionally – and a broad perspective to meet the challenges of the times.

Nowadays, the importance of a general education has come to be widely accepted in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia. With the rapid development of all disciplines and technology, university curriculums have become increasingly specialized and professionalized, and students are having to delve ever more deeply into their major subject; yet their overall perspective often becomes narrow and superficial. More and more universities have come to realize that a university must not take as its sole aim the imparting of professional know-how or the production of sophisticated research. To make far-reaching and lasting contributions to society and culture, universities should train students to be responsible, motivated, and knowledgeable members of society. To nurture truly educated and cultured individuals, universities must, apart from raising the standard of major subjects, devote their efforts to instituting, developing, and improving the general education or cultural quality of their students. As the University is a pioneer in general education in the Chinese regions, the “CUHK model” may serve as a model of reference.

However, there is no static “CUHK model”. While the objectives and vision have been clear and constant, the implementation of the General Education (GE) programme at this University has moved forward with the times. It has progressed in step with changes in local society, changes in the culture of the University itself and with developments there, and in response to the different challenges and constraints of the times. While the GE programme at CUHK today, with a history of over forty years, has received indisputable recognition, we are still looking for ever better ways to achieve the ideals of general education through the interaction of the aspirations and needs of society, the university, teachers, and students.

It is hoped that this brief review of the implementation of the GE programme at CUHK shows how the University has been devoting efforts to attaining its unswerving educational goals under differing circumstances.


CUHK was established in 1963 as a federal university with three constituent colleges, Chung Chi, New Asia, and United. Chung Chi College and New Asia College had been in existence for more than ten years, and United College for seven years. Although they had different backgrounds and different characteristics, all of the colleges were founded by scholars, educators, and educational institutions from mainland China who had moved to Hong Kong with the political changeover on the mainland and who felt the need to carry on with their educational and cultural commitments.

In the early days the Colleges were short of funds and their degrees were not recognized by the Government. Yet thanks to the commitment of staff and students alike to the ideals of higher education and to the notions of social and cultural responsibility, they weathered financial hardships...
and each college developed a distinctive spirit. Chung Chi College took upon itself the mission of promulgating Christianity, introducing Western culture, and promoting the modernization of China; New Asia College aspired to revitalize traditional Chinese culture and to find a new way forward for the Chinese people; while United College aimed to promote cultural interaction between the East and the West and to adapt to the changes of the times. These colleges were small, and had only a limited number of teachers and students. Being closely knit, however, the college community readily found its identity. Hence, although there was no formal GE as such, the aspirations of the colleges had a decided influence on students’ characters, inspiring them to go beyond the study of their majors and pursue moral ideals and justice. At New Asia “Chinese History” was a course taken by all students; and at Chung Chi, “Philosophy of Life” was a compulsory course, later to become the core of its GE programme.

When the University was first established, it inherited the educational goals of the constituent colleges. The need for the balanced development of liberal arts and specialized education was advocated, and equal emphasis was given to professional expertise and leadership qualities. The curriculum therefore strengthened specialized subject-based teaching in the students’ major and minor fields of study on the one hand, and stressed general education and bilingualism on the other. At that time, each college designed its GE programme in accordance with its traditional ideals and curriculum. Chung Chi College was the first to revamp its GE, introducing the “Integrative Basic Studies” Programme, a well-planned programme running through the entire four years, with the “Idea of a University” and the “Art of Thinking” in the first year, “Chinese Culture” in the second year, “Western Culture” in the third year, and “Perspectives in the Sciences” and “Senior Seminar” in the fourth year. New Asia College kept its old programme, requiring students to take Chinese and English for two years, Chinese history for one year, and a Social Science course or Natural Science course for one year. United College had six electives from which the students could choose.

The federal college system, apart from allowing the colleges to retain their characteristics, facilitated the development of a close teacher-student relationship. However, for academic departments, the division of resources among the colleges restricted their size and hampered the development of a comprehensive, balanced curriculum. The deployment of resources for the University as a whole was also disorganized. This was not conducive to the consolidation and expansion of individual disciplines or to the rapid development of the University as an institution of higher education with international standing.

**College GE under a Unitary University Administration (1976 – 1986)**

In 1976, although respecting the traditions of the colleges and retaining the federal principle, the University reinforced a unitary administrative system. Under this system college departments belonging to the same discipline were integrated into one department, under the governance of the central administration. These academic departments were responsible for “subject-orientated” teaching, while the colleges would be responsible for “student-orientated” teaching. The former were to impart knowledge through formal teaching (e.g., lectures and seminars); and the latter would, through small-group teaching, help students develop to the fullest level their capacity, distinctive talents, judgment and intellectual independence. As the purpose of “student-orientated” teaching was akin to that of general education, GE continued to be entrusted to the Colleges.

However, as a result of this reorganization, although the colleges were still responsible for designing and managing GE, the assignment of teaching duties was vested with the academic departments. With the growth in student numbers and the concomitant rising demands of major subjects, the colleges found it increasingly difficult to organize and coordinate GE courses. At the same time, from the late 1970s the University was under pressure by the Government to reduce its undergraduate curriculum to three years. Teachers and students alike were opposed to such a change. One of the main reasons for their opposition was that the
University had always attached great importance to general education and a three-year curriculum was ill-suited to the proper conduct of GE.

Since the academic structure was incompatible with the full development of GE, the value of which became a matter of common concern, another reform in GE was clearly called for.

**University GE Programme with “Seven Areas” (1986 – 1991)**

In late 1983 the University appointed a special panel to conduct a comprehensive review of the undergraduate curriculum. Its report, submitted in late 1984, recommended many major reforms, including restructuring the GE programme, strengthening its curriculum, raising standards, and setting clear and specific goals. The report also recommended strengthening the Senate Committee on General Education, to oversee the design of the new GE programme, and appointing a Director of General Education to implement a university-wide GE programme.

In accordance with the main recommendations of the report, GE entered a new phase in 1986. The revamped GE now amounted to 15% (18 units) of an undergraduate’s course load, a significant increase from the previous requirement of 10 – 11%.

In deference to college traditions and student-orientated teaching, the new curriculum still had provision for colleges to design GE courses for their students, up to 6 units. The rest of the GE was a university-wide programme, provided by the academic departments and coordinated by the Director of General Education. It was divided into seven areas: Logical Thinking and Quantitative Studies, Chinese Civilization, Other Civilizations, Computer Studies, Art and Humanities, Natural and Medical Science, and Social Science and Management. The first two areas were compulsory, with the students having to take one course in each area, for a total of 6 units; courses were to be elected from the other areas to make up the remaining units. The task of raising the students’ Chinese and English standards was not put under GE, and the University offered general Chinese and English courses for those freshmen who did not meet the University’s language requirements.

The overhauled GE programme provided for a more reasonable division of responsibility and authority between the colleges and departments. Furthermore, the design of the university-wide programme was also more systematic and comprehensive. The two compulsory areas reaffirmed the commitment of the University towards the research and development of Chinese culture, as well as an emphasis on training the independent and rational thinking of students. Meanwhile, the diversified scope of the elective areas enabled students to take courses outside of their major subject area according to their individual interests and needs, in order to broaden their horizons and enhance their exposure to the approaches and methodologies of different disciplines. However, the perception of and enthusiasm for GE varied from faculty to faculty and from department to department, and their involvement, in terms of manpower and attention, differed widely. All in all, the shortage of manpower and the sluggish growth in the number of courses constituted the biggest obstacle in this phase. Moreover, the GE study scheme prescribed by some colleges and departments made for complicated restrictions on the completion of GE requirements, resulting in problems of operation.

**Flexible Credit Unit System and GE Programme with “Three Areas” (1991 - 1997)**

In early 1989, the Government required all UGC-funded institutions to admit Secondary 7 students under a joint scheme and to standardize the length of first-degree programmes in the same subject. The University, upholding its educational ideals, refused to switch to a rigid three-year programme, adopting instead, in 1991, a flexible credit unit system, which permits students to complete the required number of units and graduate in four years, three years, or even less, according to their ability.

Pursuant to this change, the GE requirement was reduced to 15 units – still constituting 15% of the minimum number of required units, with College GE requirements varying from 3 to 5 units. The number of areas was reduced to three – Chinese Culture, Disciplinary Courses, and Interdisciplinary Courses. Chinese Culture still being compulsory, with students having to take one course. Colleges and departments could no longer set their own required areas and years of study: students were allowed to choose freely from the two areas other than their major. This flexibility was in keeping with the flexible credit unit system.
Programme Reorganization and Establishment of Faculty GE (1997 – 2000)

The one-line budget introduced in 1995 has had a far-reaching influence on GE. Under this new system of resource allocation, the funds allocated to a university department depends directly on the number of students taught. With this incentive, departments were encouraged to offer more GE courses. The number of GE courses, which was less than 100 in the early nineties, jumped to over 150 by 1996, and to over 230 by 2000. There was an unprecedentedly rich and varied array of courses for students to choose from.

The freer choice of courses and the sharp increase in the number of courses were no doubt developments favourable to stimulating students to broaden their horizons. However, the large number of courses in a reduced number of areas made for poor organization. Furthermore, although the flexible credit unit system is not a three-year programme, most students opted to graduate in three years. Their undergraduate years were thus crammed, and GE came to be regarded by many as an extra burden, to be handled perfunctorily.

Hence, in 1996, the Senate Committee on General Education began to consider reorganizing the GE programme, to add appropriate guidelines for selecting courses. With regard to the University GE component, starting from 1997, while Chinese Culture continued to be compulsory, the Disciplinary Courses and Interdisciplinary Courses classification was abolished. Instead, all courses were grouped into Elective Area I, II, or III: Elective I was mainly for first- and second-year students, Elective Area II was open to all students, and Elective Area III gave priority to third-year students. The College GE component reinstated the maximum of 6 units in 1998.

However, since the demarcation into Elective Areas failed to serve as an effective guideline for students and led to administrative complications, in 2000 the Senate Committee on General Education introduced “Faculty General Education” on a trial basis. Each faculty was to review its students’ needs with the departments and prescribe a GE area from which its students must select at least one course. The courses for each faculty could be designed and offered by its departments, and could also be selected from existing GE courses. The rationale was to help students choose, from a smaller and defined area, courses better suited to their needs. Furthermore, it was hoped that due to their faculty’s directives and recommendations, the students would attach due importance to GE.

The University GE courses were thus grouped into three areas: the compulsory Chinese Culture, “Faculty General Education”, and an Elective Area, with “Faculty General Education” differing for different faculties. The students’ feedback to the new system differed from faculty to faculty, mainly because the faculties defined their areas with different criteria and allowed different degrees of freedom in the selection of courses, giving rise to some controversy. As a result, after a trial period of two years, “Faculty General Education” was made no longer binding.

Curriculum Review and GE with “Four Areas” (2004)

In 2002 an opportunity arose for another review of GE. In 2002 the University Grants Committee conducted the second Teaching and Learning Quality Process Review among the eight UGC-funded tertiary institutions, and this University’s GE programme was chosen as one of the areas for review. The relevant preparatory work and self-appraisal became the groundwork for an internal curriculum review. In September 2002 the Vice-Chancellor appointed a Review Committee on General Education to carry out a comprehensive review of the GE programme and submit a proposal for the way forward. Apart from meeting with faculty and college representatives, teachers, and students, the Committee also examined developments in GE in China and abroad. After almost a year’s deliberations, the Committee in 2003 submitted its report to the Senate through the Vice-Chancellor, and the report was approved in October.

The report accomplished three tasks in relation to the GE programme: it clearly set out its objectives and expectations, restructured the curriculum, and laid down the framework for effective management and quality assurance.

The report spelt out the following specific objectives for GE at CUHK:

(a) to provide broad intellectual perspective and to instill an understanding of the values of different academic disciplines,

(b) to develop sensitivity to the common concerns of human existence,
(e) to help students develop their own judgment and sense of values,
(d) to cultivate awareness of the connections among different fields of knowledge, to develop the potentiality for integrating different fields of knowledge as needed,
(e) to equip students with the capacity for life-long learning, especially through an understanding of the connection between academic pursuits and life experiences.

For the curriculum, the report recommended classifying courses into four areas, based on human intellectual concerns – “Chinese Cultural Heritage”, “Nature, Technology, and the Environment”, “Society and Culture” and “Self and Humanity”. It further recommended that all undergraduates (with the exception of those majoring in specifically approved professional programmes) must complete at least one course in each area.

To step up quality assurance, the report proposed setting up a Standing Committee to examine and monitor the GE curriculum and review all University GE courses every three years. The report further recommended inviting external experts to visit the University at intervals of three years to conduct an overall review of the GE curriculum. To collect material for the reviews, the Office of University General Education is required to collate and archive relevant data with respect to all University GE courses; e.g., course syllabuses and outlines, assessment schemes, and bibliographies.

These measures were implemented in 2004. This was the first comprehensive overhaul of the curriculum since the “seven-area” GE reform in 1986. No change was made to the unit requirement, but, in view of the increasing number of Secondary 6 entrants and the anticipated reversion to a four-year undergraduate programme, the new GE curriculum requires Secondary 6 entrants to take 6 additional units of GE courses, for a total of 18 – 21 units. As College GE is under the jurisdiction of the colleges, this review did not include College GE.

Parallel to efforts in establishing effective quality assurance mechanisms, building a culture that recognizes the importance of general education among teachers, students and other university constituents is another key direction after the 2003 review. To facilitate two-way dialogue, the Office of University General Education has acted on the report’s recommendation to organize regular teaching seminars for sharing of teaching experiences and discussion on issues related to general education. It also conducts focus groups and questionnaire survey to collect the views of students. To honor teachers’ contribution to general education, the Senate Committee on General Education approved in 2006 the establishment of the Exemplary Teaching Award in General Education. The award was first conferred in 2007.

In 2005, thanks to the generous donation by the Edwin S. L. Cheng Research Fund for General Education and Philosophy, the Research Centre for General Education was founded under the Office of University General Education, with the mandate to collate and conduct research on important topics in general education, and coordinate related academic activities. The Centre has since contributed much to the building of general education culture on the campus, as well as the fostering of exchange between the Office of University General Education and tertiary institutes in different regions.

New Curriculum, New Challenges: The Reading of Classics and the Ideals of University [2012]

The “Four Areas” framework currently adopted by CUHK in its General Education programme is a relatively systematic approach to broadening students’ horizon. Meanwhile, since each Area consists of a great number of courses for students’ choice, the framework is not conducive to creating a common learning experience among students through which they jointly reflect on issues of importance and lasting human concern. According to findings from long-term research in higher education by American educators, the most effective General Education programmes are core programmes that are required of all students, that create a common learning experience among students through which they jointly reflect on issues of importance and lasting human concern. According to findings from long-term research in higher education by American educators, the most effective General Education programmes are core programmes that are required of all students, that create a common learning experience among them and stimulate discussion on important issues both inside and outside the class. Hence, with the Hong Kong Education Bureau’s decision that local universities switch to a four-year system in 2012, and with CUHK’s decision to add 6 extra units of General Education to its new curriculum, the Office of University General Education took the opportunity to
introduce a 6-unit common foundation programme, which is to be taken by all first-year and second-year students.

The new General Education Foundation Programme comprises two core courses that are multi-cultural and cross-disciplinary, namely, “In Dialogue with Humanity” and “In Dialogue with Nature”. Through the study of classics East and West, which are selected from different cultural traditions and disciplines, students are guided to deliberate on and seek answers to some essential and long-lasting questions about human life and about knowledge. While “In Dialogue with Humanity” seeks to address the two big questions of “What constitutes a good life?” and “What constitutes a good society?”, “In Dialogue with Nature” examines what we know about nature and what limitations we face in our attempts to understand nature. In total, more than 20 classics are selected for the two courses. Teaching and learning is conducted mainly through seminar discussion in small groups, supplemented by big lectures and online learning. Students have to be active learners, reading the weekly assigned text beforehand, exchanging views on the text in class, and write up their thoughts afterwards. Through interactions with fellow students and the teacher, and through deep personal reflections, students can gain understanding of the wisdom in the texts, and examine their implications for the modern world and their limitations.

The two foundation courses, one focusing on the humanities and the other on the sciences, cover masterpieces from cultures as diverse as Chinese and Western, Islamic, Buddhist and Christian, etc., spanning over 2000 years. The weight and richness of the syllabus and the fast pace of teaching are big challenges for both teachers and students. Yet, if the foremost concern of General Education is to widen students’ horizon, and if CUHK’s education ideal is to bring together China and the West, and to combine tradition with modernity, the General Education Foundation Programme can be seen as fulfilling true embodiment of both the University mission and the goal of General Education. The two “dialogue” courses encourage students to think through serious questions, to cultivate good reading habits, to have the courage to raise questions, and to interact and share views with others. All these will help lay a good foundation for their academic studies. In helping students become learned intellectuals of depth and vision, this is certainly an important step forward.

Significance of the Implementation of the “CUHK Model”

This brief review shows that GE at CUHK has by no means been static. The GE curriculum and the structure of the curriculum have kept changing with the times, society, and the structure of the University curriculum – but it has not drifted with the tide without a clear sense of direction. CUHK has, since its inception, recognized that a university’s mission is not merely to train professionals.

Rather, to nurture real leaders, a university should help students develop a broad perspective, the ability to view issues in their entirety as well as to make in-depth analyses, the breadth of mind to accept differences of opinion, and appropriate cultural accomplishment. For a university to achieve the target of a “balanced education”, general education is indispensable. This is not to imply that the “CUHK model” of general education is the most ideal model that has “achieved the target”. The changes in our GE programme are precisely an ongoing search for a more effective way to achieve the University’s ideals in the face of internal and external changes and constraints. In the implementation of GE at this University, the participation of colleges, faculties, and departments has made diversified development possible; and continuing reviews, improvements, and attention to student needs have made for maximum openness. Diversification and openness are perhaps the foundation for the vitality of the “CUHK model”.

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