



Reflections on the Development of General Education of University

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Abstract. General education has become a key issue in the reform of higher education in China. However, the reflection on the question of what kind of people are cultivated in universities and the search for the orientation of universities are far from over, because with the development of general education, general education has become theoretically popularized and vulgarized, and practically formalized and technicalized, which deviates from the true meaning of general education. The essence of general education is the education of values to reach a common value orientation in modern society. The shaping of common values is the soul and unifying factor of the entire general education, and is the bridge that connects the core courses of general education to each other and to the organic whole. This paper analyzes the current situation of general education in China and puts forward some reflections and suggestions to its optimization.

Keywords: University general education · Professional education · Common values

1 Introduction

In the 1990s, in order to correct the tendency of over-emphasizing the division and specialization of knowledge in higher education and neglecting the comprehensive quality training of students, China's universities began to introduce general education. If the cultural quality education for college students, which emerged in the mid-1990s, is taken as the starting point of localized general education in China, general education has been explored and developed in China for at least 20 years. General education has become one of the basic directions of higher education reform and an important part of university education in China. With the passage of time and the deepening of reform, some deep-rooted conflicts are gradually exposed. People begin to wonder: Is general education effective? Does general education improve or reduce the quality of undergraduate education? Is general education the direction of China's undergraduate education reform?

2 Understanding of University General Education

2.1 The Concept of University General Education

The term “liberal education” originates from the United States and England, and the English equivalent is “General Education”. Another familiar term is “Liberal Arts”, which translates to “liberal education”. Another similar term is “Liberal Education”, which translates to “free education” in Chinese [1]. Liberal education itself originated in the 19th century, when many scholars in Europe and the United States felt that the academic divisions of modern universities were too specialized and knowledge was severely fragmented, so they created liberal education with the aim of training students to think independently and to have an understanding of different disciplines, so that they could integrate different knowledge, with the ultimate goal of cultivating a complete and integral human being [2].

2.2 The Purpose of University General Education

The purpose of general education is not simply to convey information to students, but to enable them to form their own opinions, that is, to develop habits of personal discernment and intellectual learning. General education of university requires both breadth and depth, with students being able to engage in a wide range of disciplines as well as being dedicated to the in-depth study of a particular subject area. When encountering problems, students can think from a more open, interdisciplinary perspective, collect information, communicate and collaborate, and achieve communication between different disciplines. General education aims to cultivate the well-rounded person, that is, a person with a vision, a comprehensive understanding, a liberal spirit and a beautiful emotion, rather than just a specialized person in a narrow field of expertise.

General education is a modern education from the West. In modern China, educators such as Cai Yuanpei, Mei Yiqi and Pan Guangdan can be regarded as pioneers in exploring the issues of university general education in university. Cai Yuanpei’s mission is to cultivate talents not only with profound professional knowledge but also with deep and broad knowledge; not only with the ability to study theories in depth but also with the quality of both literature and science. In recent years, general education has been widely emphasized and researched in China’s higher education sector, and an early researcher on liberal education is Li Manli, a scholar at the Institute of Education, Tsinghua University. Dr. Li Manli has systematically elaborated on the nature, content and purpose of general education in three dimensions: In terms of purpose, general education aims to produce socially responsible, well-rounded individuals and citizens of the country who are actively involved in the life of society; in nature, general education is the non-vocational and non-professional education that all college students should receive; in terms of content, general education is a broad, non-utilitarian education of basic knowledge, skills and attitudes [3].

To sum up, general education is a non-utilitarian education mode that cultivates all-round talents. Students trained under the general education mode have both moral integrity and ability, as well as liberal arts and science, so they are equipped with the ability to solve practical problems in the future [4].

3 Current Problems of General Education in China's Universities

For a long time in the past, higher education in China has attached importance to professional education and neglected the role of general education in cultivating comprehensive talents. Many colleges and universities in China have made attempts on the general education model, and more famous typical models of general education have been derived, such as Peking University model (experimental class + elective course model), Wuhan University model (university-wide elective course model), Fudan University model (establishment of undergraduate college of general education), etc. However, the development of general education in China's universities has been short and inexperienced, and the inertial influence of the traditional educational philosophy and educational teaching mode focusing on professional education still persists, and general education has failed to play an important role as it should. What is general education? The majority of universities in China do not go beyond the scope of "humanistic quality education", although they may have different interpretations of it. Some universities simply offer courses such as "classical reading", "art appreciation", and "cultural interest" and so on, which are even jokingly called "general education hodgepodge" by students. Some colleges and universities mistakenly believe that to achieve "general knowledge", they should cover everything and learn everything. Corresponding to the curriculum, the content is complicated and there are many names, which not only leads to confusion in the structure of the curriculum system, but also adds extra burden to teachers and students. Some universities only understand general education at the level of knowledge education, lack top-level design of general education objectives and overall planning of education contents, and turn general education into knowledge platter and encyclopedic hodgepodge [5].

There are at least two levels of problems with the current general education in universities: First, to be effective, general education should not stop at the constant inculcation of specific contents, but should focus on training students how to think. It is not only about reading the classics and masterpieces, but also about how to read them and how teachers and students interact with each other. This dimension addresses the issue of the approach to general education. Second, and most crucially, the effectiveness of general education depends mainly on who leads it and where it leads to. This level is to address the political issue, the issue of values.

4 Reflections on the Development of General Education in China's Universities

The effectiveness of the implementation of general education depends on the understanding of the concept of general education and the exploration of the rationality of the practice. It is necessary to clarify the concept of general education, to accurately position general education, to scientifically set up the content of general education courses on this basis, to adopt a combination of in-class and extra-curricular forms of general education teaching, and to build a combination of in-school and out-of-school general education teachers.

4.1 The Orientation of General Education: The Integration of General Education and Professional Education

The integration of general education and professional education includes the integration of knowledge, the integration of knowledge and student experience, and the integration of values among different students. There are three ways to achieve the integration of general education and professional education. First, the reconfiguration of cross-discipline, the fusion of knowledge systems, is not only a cross-fertilization of theories and methods, but also a penetration of values, with a “holistic” view of the problem. Secondly, through “entering the classic text”, teachers can discover and explore some so-called “fundamental questions” and bring students into dialogues with the new problems faced in real life. Third, the pedagogical concept of general education is fully permeated in the field of professional education to form an integrated, reflective and critical level of pedagogical integration [6]. Although not all professional education can be well integrated with general education, the integration of professional education and general education is a process of continuous exploration and pursuit.

Whether it is social consensus building, discerning and judging values, expression and communication, lifelong learning, or life enrichment, these goals of general education are difficult or largely impossible to achieve through professional education. The goal of professional education is to produce scholars or experts in a particular field, this inherent narrowness and rigidity can limit students’ horizons, immersing them too much in specialized knowledge and acquiring arrogance and prejudice along with it. In this context, there is a need for general education to provide a new balance, redesigning curricula and teaching methods in line with the goals of general education, thus compensating for the shortcomings of professional education.

4.2 General Education Philosophy: Common Values and Culture

The most important thing in general education is the education of values. Professional education itself does not, or can hardly, provide such values. Scientists with the same expertise often act in opposite ways with different values. General education should help students establish Chinese values. At the undergraduate level, students should have an understanding and knowledge of several major civilizations and values of the contemporary world. But this understanding should not be superficial, but serve two purposes: first, to understand the essence of various civilizations. The second is to be able to compare different civilizations and values and make their own judgments on the basis of understanding, so as to establish Chinese values.

The most important function of general education is to build social consensus [7]. One must learn shared values and become a responsible participant in the culture. General education contains both the value of knowledge sharing and the value of culture. This allows students from different disciplines and backgrounds to engage in heartfelt dialogue and communication, and to mutually construct and share common knowledge, experiences and cultures. Through education, students will gradually understand what the world is, what China is, what society is, and who they are; through education, students will gradually understand China’s history, present and future, the relationship between

China and the world, and the direction of personal development and the nation's advancement; through education, students will gradually learn to communicate, exchange, compromise and cooperate with others, express their own views accurately, and understand others' views correctly, so as to build up a social consensus on Chinese civilization, reform and opening up, and the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation at the broadest level. This function can only be achieved through general education and cannot be replaced by any other institutions or professional education.

University general education should be rooted in national cultural traditions. Cultural traditions are the spiritual wealth of a nation that has been built up over generations and are a continuous source of motivation for a nation's development. Cultural traditions create a sense of self-esteem, pride and self-improvement in a people. With it, a nation can be energized to solve the complex problems it faces and be reborn when faced with the challenges of an overwhelming historical environment. Cultural traditions contain the unique spiritual values, way of thinking and imagination of the Chinese people, reflecting the vitality and creativity of the Chinese people, and are the crystallization of the wisdom of all ethnic groups, as well as the treasure of all human civilization. The university general education should stand on the base of traditional culture, seek the docking of tradition and reality, explore the value of traditional culture, take up the great cultural responsibility, silently and without stopping, draw from traditional culture the treasures that are beneficial to the education of the real society and the hearts of the world, purify the polluted social customs and people's souls, and forge cultural character in the spiritual condensation and elevation, so as to strengthen the national cultural awareness of teachers and students and arouse the cultural self-awareness of the Chinese nation.

5 Conclusion

General education is not abstract, but concrete; it is not a universal truth that can be universally applied, but a product deeply rooted in different social and cultural backgrounds. The path of building general education of university should be redesigned from the perspective of Chinese traditional culture, the history and future of Chinese social development. Building general education in China is an extremely difficult task. Chinese universities cannot simply adapt the curriculum and specific measures of Harvard University, even if they transplant them. It will not produce any practical effect. Chinese universities should draw the essence from the educational traditions of the East and the West, explore their own model of general education in a practical manner, clarify their goals, improve their teaching philosophy and methods, and at the same time have enough patience to solve problems little by little in order to provide students with a better and higher quality education and to realize the mission and values of this generation of educators.

Authors' Contributions. This paper is independently completed by Xinlian Zhang.

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