

Editorial:

General Education in a Context of Mass Higher Education in the East and West

Shen Wenqin* and Adam Nelson**

General education, like professional education, has come to be considered an important part of modern higher education, its ostensible purpose to cultivate “broad knowledge” and thus help to form “educated citizens” (Parsons & Platt, 1973). Often emphasized in response to a process of rapid “massification” in higher education systems, general education can be construed as a way to preserve intellectual tradition or promote academic innovation, to protect common values or prepare students for effective participation in culturally diverse societies. Today, the idea of general education is ubiquitous in higher education, but it achieved this position differently in different places over time. In the United States it was institutionalized during the early twentieth century, and in East Asia during the early twenty-first, but in some European countries general education was considered a task of primary and secondary schools rather than universities well into the 1950s (James, 1958). Indeed, general education’s place in higher (or tertiary) education has been a subject of persistent debate.

Joseph Ben-David addressed this debate in the 1970s with a subtle distinction between what he called explicit and implicit general education, the former represented by the United States, the latter by European countries such as Germany or France (Ben-David, 1977). Under the explicit model, universities require undergraduates to accumulate general-education credits in courses outside their majors; under the implicit model, universities do not formally require curricular breadth but seek to embody a spirit of generalism within specialized or professional education, for example, by requiring students of engineering to discuss the ethics of bridge construction or inculcating the virtues of citizenship via the extracurriculum, that is, through sports, clubs, and residential/dormitory activities (Ashby, 1958; Burrage, 1998). In modern colleges and universities around the world, the functional aims of general education are pursued in many ways.

This special issue carries the debates around general education into a context of “massified” higher education on a global scale. In recent decades, college and university enrollments have increased significantly around the world. As many nations’ higher education systems have been transformed from elite to mass systems, the scale of professional and postgraduate education has grown as well. In this context, more students begin their undergraduate studies without specific career goals, a change that has spurred institutions to rethink their approach to general education. In 2012, for example, when Hong Kong shifted from a three-year to a four-year system for the B.A. degree (to parallel the American

* Associate professor, Peking University, China, email: shenwenqin@pku.edu.cn

** Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison, USA, email: adam.nelson@wisc.edu

system), all of its universities introduced general education requirements into their curricular structures. In the same way, many European universities have begun to experiment with new approaches to general education—not only to accommodate a wider range of preparation among their undergraduates but also to expose students to diverse fields of knowledge (from ancient to modern) and to facilitate the kinds of interdisciplinary analysis that are necessary to answer complex questions.

This rise of general education is clearly evident in East Asian universities. Mou Leping's article in this special issue compares general, or "whole-person," education in three places—Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—where missionary universities laid a foundation, both institutionally and intellectually, for later developments. After the 1990s, for example, universities in Mainland China began to introduce general education more explicitly into the undergraduate curriculum. Pang, Wang, and Bao's article in this issue follows the historical evolution of general education for undergraduates at the Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT), founded in 1940 under Soviet influence as the first university to be created by the Communist Party of China. BIT has long been regarded for its excellence in science and technology, but as Pang, Wang, and Bao observe, general education courses in the humanities and social sciences have gradually been integrated into BIT's undergraduate program. And BIT is not unique. In a context of higher-education massification (and institutional differentiation and stratification), universities across East Asia have begun to expand their infrastructures of general education to serve diverse student needs.

Just as Harvard, Princeton, and Columbia were leaders in general-education reform in the United States in the early twentieth century, Peking University and Tsinghua University have become pioneers of general-education reform in China. The article in this issue co-authored by Xie Xinyi, et al., uses survey data from Peking University to explore how graduates assess the effects of general education and how their self-reported evaluations differ by gender identity, academic major, post-graduation plan, and family background. The analysis shows that, while many students believe they gained some benefits from general-education courses, most place a higher value on courses in their majors. Thus, even as general education becomes more deeply institutionalized, it continues to face questions about its utility and legitimacy in a high-status Chinese university where specialized expertise and pre-professional education are esteemed.

Since the 1980s, the reform of higher education in China, including the reform of general education, has been carried out in a context of globalization. In this process, Chinese reformers' gaze has shifted from Soviet to American models of higher education. While the idea of general, or liberal, education often seems to its American proponents to be perpetually "at risk"—a result of the parallel massification of the university and the instrumentalization of the curriculum at all levels (from research universities to community colleges)—nonetheless the American model of general education, with its dual emphasis on moral and practical learning (both derived from its philosophical roots in pragmatism), has attracted considerable attention from reformers in other parts of the world. Two papers in this special issue reflect this desire to learn from the American experience with general education, not only in large

universities but also (perhaps especially) in small “liberal arts” colleges.

In recent years, a growing number of parents in East Asia have chosen to send their children to elite American liberal arts colleges, despite the expense of tuition in these institutions (most of which are private). In their article, Dongfang Wang and Yasi Xu have examined the curriculum and pedagogy of these colleges and have found that small class sizes, close relationships between students and faculty, interdisciplinary courses and majors, and extensive co-curricular activities, including job internships, study abroad opportunities, and research apprenticeships constitute the “best practices” of highly ranked liberal arts colleges. While expensive (and, significantly, often located in quiet, safe, and culturally homogeneous rural or suburban communities), these colleges adopt both “explicit” and “implicit” models of general education and produce a disproportionate number of professional and postgraduate students. Yet, even in these colleges, the idea of general education has undergone a subtle change in recent years.

Wang Chen and Liu Min’s article in this special issue notes a paradigm shift in American models of general education—a shift from to a “liberal” to a more “practical,” or instrumental, orientation. They claim that general education in the United States has entered a new historical stage, one responsive to external social, political, and economic forces that have led college and university leaders to collapse the distinction between general and professional education and tie general education more directly to occupational-vocational aims. Increasingly, general education is not a supplement to professional or specialized postgraduate education but, rather, in a context of profound employment uncertainties and labor-market anxieties, has been placed in service to it. On the one hand, this shift toward practicality has amplified the perceived benefits of general education in terms of intellectual flexibility and interdisciplinarity, but on the other hand, it has dramatically altered (or narrowed) the relationship between general education and the broader pursuit of citizenship or social criticism. To counter the objection that general education has no value in students’ job searches, general education itself has become functionalized.

This shift is not unique to American general education. In some cases in East Asia, the idea of general education is linked explicitly to entrepreneurship (including “social entrepreneurship”) or innovation (often framed in commercial, or market, terms and new modes of individual self-fashioning for a competitive society). In the process, the once-central role of general education in political socialization—and specifically in the cultivation of democratic citizenship—has slowly been sidelined. Perhaps the key question going forward, then, is what form(s) general education will take in colleges and universities in the twenty-first century. If general education continues to be a preferred way to accommodate the long-term effects of higher-education massification and diversification—if not always democratization—then what approaches to general education will be taken up in different countries? What characteristics might these programs share, or, as several authors ask in their articles in this special issue, to what extent might the principles or purposes of general education differ across countries according to institutional type, or regime type? To what extent might the ideological bent of general

education in the United States differ from its valence in China, India, Russia, Ghana, or elsewhere?

Bryan Penprase considers some of these questions in the final article in this special issue. He demonstrates that institutions of higher education around the world have begun to look to general education as the optimal way to foster the intellectual agility, ethical sensibility, communication skills, historical understanding, and cultural awareness needed to solve the world's most complex problems. He contends that contemporary enthusiasm for general education stems directly from the demands of a twenty-first-century "knowledge economy." He cites the notion of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and its exponential technologies as the impetus for new schemes of general education designed to help students think about urgent challenges, from environmental crises and pandemic diseases to related migration patterns and geopolitical tensions. As he comments, the international spread of general education has the potential to foster among the next generation of undergraduates the habits of deep reflection, honest communication, sincere collaboration, and "global citizenship" that will be vital for human peace and prosperity—perhaps survival—in the future.

This special issue aims to facilitate east-west conversations about the past, present, and future of general education. Its essays were originally presented at the international conference "Liberal Education: An Intercultural Dialogue between China and the West," held at Peking University on January 3-4, 2020. This conference was generously sponsored by the Chen Yidan Foundation, to which we express our gratitude.

References

- Ashby, E. (1958). *Technology and the Academics*. London: Macmillan.
- Ben-David, J. (1977). *Centers of Learning: Britain, France, Germany, the United States; An Essay*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Boyle, M.E. (2020). Liberal Education across Continents: Transfer Elasticity and US Influence. *Comparative Education Review*, 64(2), 207-227.
- Burrage, M. (1998). The Curious Case of General Education in England. *高等教育ジャーナル* 3, 14-18.
- James, Sir Eric. (1958). Science and Education: An English View. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 14(9), 359-363.
- Logan J., & Curry J. (2015). A Liberal Arts Education: Global Trends and Challenges. *Christian Higher Education*, 14(1-2), 66-79.
- Parsons, T., & Gerald P. (1973). *The American University*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.