

Fulbright Scholars' Visit to HKUST on 19 November 2009

Brief Notes of Breakout Session A

Discussion Topic:

Should there be any prescribed elements in General Education (GE)? Would such prescribed elements help deliver the GE in alignment with our institutional character? How do we define the prescribed elements?

Should GE reflect the core values of the university? University values should be reflected in every aspect of student life and learning experience. Nevertheless, GE can be a good platform to demonstrate to students the values of HKUST especially in their first year of study. Rather than inculcating these values in students, we should provide opportunities for students to recognize the values through self-exploration.

Sometimes a specific set of GE topics do not make up a good GE curriculum. What is more important is the set of skills or awareness that can be acquired by students through their learning experience. The following knowledge/skills are considered essential with reference to the general background of HKUST students.

- **Critical Thinking:** GE should enable students to practice critical thinking independently across different fields. It provides students with ways of thinking and confidence to succeed in their work across disciplines and even beyond university studies.
- **Hong Kong History / Modern History:** Hong Kong is a special city with unique culture and people. At the same time, students might not be fully aware of their identity as a Chinese and Hong Kong citizen. An interesting topic like 'Becoming Hong Kong' will be conducive to students' inquiry of their identity.
- **The Relationship between East and West:** There is limited coverage of international news in today's media. Given the growing media influence on the general public, students tend to be inward looking. As Hong Kong occupies a special position in the global economy, we can cultivate a global view amongst students.

Discussion Points

- Pedagogic elements are pivotal to engage students and to provoke thinking and reflection e.g. History can be a boring topic. A lively discussion on an interesting topic led by the instructor will be highly effective.
- Instructors need to be committed to the GE mode and be innovative about teaching and learning.
- A GE topic may encompass knowledge in various disciplines. Both students and instructors need to be open to new ideas and knowledge outside their profession.

Brief Notes of Breakout Session B

Discussion Topic:

HKUST is a research-based university focusing on science & technology. Most of our undergraduates received science education during their high school, but are less cultivated in non-science disciplines. How could we arouse their interest to pursue an all-round education during their college years? How should we develop interdisciplinary GE courses to fit the student population at HKUST?

The group began the discussion by sharing their views towards general education (GE) and some questions about it:

1. There is a relationship among different areas such as science, engineering, sociology and our environment. Sometimes, students need to move outside their specialized area to learn more.
2. What kind of courses should be offered as GE?
3. How can GE be integrated into core/required courses of an academic program?
4. Topics like teamwork, leadership, social sustainability and generic skills should be covered.
5. How would the Intended Learning Outcomes of GE be assessed?
6. It is a challenge to recruit staff to teach GE courses.

The group then discussed ways to arouse students' interest in pursuing an all-round education. The following messages were suggested:

1. GE may help students in their future jobs. These courses train students to think out of the box, gain a wider view about the world, and be creative, which may help them achieve a better performance in their jobs. In Hong Kong, around 90% of the undergraduate students are the first in their family to receive university education. Most of them have a strong desire to get a good job and be rich. This message may motivate them to put more time into general education study.
2. Employers nowadays value their employees' soft skills and all-round development more than technical skills. GE courses expose students to broad knowledge outside their disciplinary field and contribute to training of some soft skills such as analytical thinking, leadership and communication skills.
3. The University may also highlight to students some great figures or successful people whose interdisciplinary skills had contributed to their success.

The final topic of discussion was on the development of interdisciplinary GE courses at HKUST. The following points were addressed.

1. The University may find out students' areas of interests and then build on these 'Points of Interest' to develop courses. (To start where you are and build on it.) Some students might have no real desire. It is good to facilitate a discussion among the students to bring out topics that are of interest to them.
2. GE courses can be developed based on the HKUST values and 'soul'. As this is a science and technology university, we should offer GE courses related to 'Science'. It is also worthwhile to set the target of giving every student some exposure to or understanding of science.
3. It is important to have courses that train students to create new market needs rather than merely to meet the needs of their future employers.
4. GE courses do not mean courses in Humanities or Social Science only.
5. Interdisciplinary courses can be developed, especially those with connections across different disciplines. Ideas could be generated from students as well. A few resources of Science and Interdisciplinarity were mentioned.
6. Revolutionary thoughts should be encouraged. Some cross models syllabus examples such as 'Coffee: Science, History and Economics' and 'Dreaming the Earth' were cited.
7. Courses with Asian culture content can be developed.
8. Courses which teach students the ways of learning can be developed.
9. Some 'High-Impact Educational Practices' were introduced.
10. The class size of 120 students is not a problem as students could be divided into groups. It is crucial to train these discussion groups.
11. Trainings (both GE concept training and teacher development) should be provided to faculty members.