

Insights into the Essence of General Education

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Abstract: There are various correct and incorrect interpretations of general education. A vague understanding definitely has a negative impact on the practice of general education. This paper starts off by analyzing the connotations behind the Chinese equivalent of the term "general education" and goes on to suggest that general education be understood from three aspects in line of China's actual situations: (1) General education is a philosophy for education and emphasizes putting people first to cultivate complete people; (2) General education frequently refers to the content taught to achieve the goals of general education; (3) General education can mean a model for cultivating talents which reflects the philosophy of general education, achieves its goals, and provides a supporting system.

Key words general education, *suzhi* education, education philosophy

People have various correct or incorrect opinions about general education: education that covers all kinds of knowledge; education that focuses on common sense and practical skills; education that combines humanities and sciences to extend students' visions and edify their minds; education that equals cultural quality education; education that carries on, enjoys, and develops lifestyles that are part of human civilization; education that cultivates wisdom and virtues to foster noble personalities; education that just means elective courses; education that goes far beyond public courses, elective courses, or lectures; education that is not all-inclusive and means more than a wide scope of knowledge; education that does not target pragmatism; education that provides the modern society with excellent citizens; education that all university students should receive; education for the elite; education that is not just for the elite and should take different contents and forms at universities of different types at different levels; education that does not distinguish between majors or vocations; education that underlies and supplements specialized studies...¹ Obviously, the jury is out with different and sometimes conflicting ideas. The big question is -- what is the essence of general education?

I. The Term "General Education" and its Chinese Equivalent

The Chinese equivalent of the term "general education" is a translation from American English and also incorporates the thoughts of liberal education in ancient Greece. The term "general education" has been translated into different things in different times, countries, and territories. In mainland China, its previous translations meant "education for all-round talents", "ordinary education", and "common education". In Hong Kong, its previous translations meant

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¹Reference source: Zhou Xiaoping's presentation titled Three General Goals in Specialized Education at the Across-the-Strait General Education Symposium held in October 2006 in Shunde

"macro-education", "education for all-round talents", "education for complete people", and "general education". When the concept of "general education" arrived in Japan, it was translated into a term meaning "manner education". The term "liberal education" from ancient Greece was translated into Chinese terms that mean "free education" or "education for knowledge and integrity". These translations all relate to general education and have been used by different groups of people. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that the current Chinese equivalent of general education became widely accepted and used in Chinese communities.

Scholars from Taiwan drew on the traditional Chinese culture to explicate the essence of general education in depth. Guo Weifan² gave the following explanation: general education is education that enables people to understand and fuse all kinds of knowledge and visions. Therefore, general education does not mean a superficial dip into every area of knowledge. Instead, it depends on a systematic approach to design liberal education courses and, through integration between different courses, serves as a guideline for students to go from a broad range to specific fields, thereby expanding their academic visions.^[1] Prof. Gao Mingshi³ from the Department of History, National Taiwan University also provided an explanation for general education: what is "general"? Scholar Zhang Xuecheng of the Qing dynasty quoted *Shuowen Jiezi* as saying "general" means "understanding what others do not understand". Today's problem is that students of humanities do not understand science and engineering while students of science and engineering do not understand humanities. This is not "general". In addition to the acquisition of knowledge, general education is about visions. In his famous work *Shi Tong*, scholar Liu Zhiji of the Tang dynasty quoted Confucius' remark "learn more and broaden your vision with goods things you have learned" to explain that scholars know many things of the past and their essence. Scholars know so much because they choose to know". Knowing more is a capability for talent and the basis for "general". However, the capability to choose what to learn depends on visions.^[2] The current equivalent of the term "general education" obviously better grasps the essence of general education and liberal education, compared with terms constrained by the words in "general education", such as "ordinary education", "common education", "all-round talent education". Besides, it carries on the spirit of the traditional Chinese culture.

The differences in understanding general education usually arise from different understandings of the word "general", which is often given a Chinese equivalent meaning "common" or "ordinary". As a result, general education was misinterpreted as common education or ordinary education, and relevant courses were misinterpreted as ordinary common sense courses. Actually, "general" has two major meanings according to Oxford English Dictionary:

(1) affecting all or most people, place or things; not limited to one part or aspect of a person or things or to a particular time;

² Guo Weifan (1937-), born in Tainan, Taiwan, graduated from the School of Education, National Taiwan Normal University and holds a doctoral degree from the University of Paris. He studied at the Institute of Education, the University of London. After returning to Taiwan, he became a professor with the Institute of Education at National Taiwan Normal University and took office as the president of the university. He became a political affairs member of the Executive Yuan in 1984 and took the concurrent post of Director of the Executive Yuan's Cultural Construction committee, which he started to hold full time in 1989. He was the Education Minister between March 1993 and 1996. Data source: <http://whgx.library.sh.cn>, July 28, 2006.

³ Gao Mingshi, born in Qingshui of Taichung, Taiwan, graduated from the Department of History, National Taiwan University. He obtained a doctorate from Tokyo University and later became a professor with the Department of History, National Taiwan University.

(2) not specialized in subject matter, not limited in range of work, use, activity, etc. These two meanings reveal two features of general education: (a) affecting the whole and (b) specific to specialized areas of education.

As far as the author is concerned, "general" is the method used to achieve the purpose of knowledge and visions. General education is not just about knowledge. Instead, it is a combination of knowledge and visions. There is frequently prejudice between people specialized in different subjects. This is especially obvious between those specialized in natural sciences and those specialized in humanities, creating two different cultures divided by a huge gap full of misunderstandings. There is little communication and understanding between these two groups.^[3] One of the reasons behind this is "not general", which leads to narrow visions and biased thoughts. The focus of general education is to broaden visions with knowledge from three main areas -- humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Such education leads people out of prejudice and bias and makes them become well-educated complete people. Of course, knowledge is infinitive, and life is short. In the modern society, nobody can learn the knowledge of all subjects. Therefore, which knowledge and ways of thinking are basic and indispensable is the central question to be considered in the research and design of general education courses.

II. Three Aspects of General Education

The author believes general education is a historical and geographic concept that has a rich essence with multiple aspects. General education should be understood from three aspects in line of China's actual situation: education philosophy, education content, talent cultivating model.

1. General Education as an Education Philosophy

It is a consensus among a large number of education researchers that general education is a philosophy for education. This gives rise to quite some questions: What is the core of general education? Does general education mean the same thing in different times, countries or territories? What kind of education objective does this philosophy reflect? Does general education apply to certain universities only or is it for all schools? Is it elite education or mass education? When it comes to the practice of a specific university, how should general education be characterized and positioned --should it just take an auxiliary position or should it become the fundamental way for the entire university? Is general education what university education is all about or should it coexist with specialized education in harmony? Let's seek the answers by looking into the kaleidoscope of general education in the United States, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

Let's first look at the philosophy of general education in the United States. In some way, general education is the result of combining liberal education and education practice in the United States. Liberal education as advocated in ancient Greece was the product of that special section of history, when the people who received such education were "free people" as opposed to slaves and artisans. These people lived a comfortable life and had plenty of leisure time. The purpose of their studies was not to make a living, but to develop rationality and perfect morality^[4]. As the society moved forward, the political, economic, and cultural foundations of traditional liberal education gradually disappeared. There were no more privileged classes like "free people" and nobles. Liberal education was no longer limited to the few free people. Instead, it became available to all citizens. Education was no longer exclusive of livelihood and pragmatism.

In the 20th century, Robert M. Hutchins (1899-1977), who had a fundamental impact on university thoughts in the United States, earnestly advocated general education. In his opinion, general education is for everyone and useful for them no matter whether they enroll at a university. General education is closely linked to universities because there is a special tie between higher education and general education. General education is the shared spiritual and cultural foundation that conjoins all schools and departments of a university. Otherwise, there is no university -- just a series of schools and departments. He clearly pointed out that there would be no universities without general education.^[5] Obviously, general education as he proposed is for all people in the society. Due to the characteristics of specialization in different schools or departments at universities, general education is particularly important for universities.

In 1945, Harvard Redbook -- General Education in a Free Society was published, which led the American society to pay great attention to and discuss general education. It is worth mentioning that the Redbook did not limit general education to universities. Instead, it looked at cultivation of citizens' virtues in the entire western world. Therefore, a good part of the Redbook was devoted to discussing general education in secondary school.^[6] There was something in common with Hutchins' remark that general education should be oriented towards everyone. The general education movement in the 1940s and 1950s not only got almost all higher education institutions involved but also raised huge interest in general education in the entire society and various academic organizations. In 1947, the Truman administration's Higher Education Committee released a report called Higher Education for American Democracy, which centered on the nation's benefits in considering general education and held that the purpose of education in a democracy is to ensure equal freedom and equal opportunity for every individual and every group. The report said the methods of education must be changed to accommodate the diversity of student groups if education is to play such a crucial role. It also suggested that general education give students values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills so that they properly and comfortably live in a free society.^[7] General education in the United States was initiated by universities and became a distinctive feature of higher education in this country. However, general education as an education philosophy is for the entire society and every citizen. Of course, general education is also the philosophy that guides higher education.

In Hong Kong, the government has been pushing for general education in high school in recent years while pursuing reforms in the educational system. General education has been established as one of the core courses in high school⁴. The Chinese University of Hong Kong always maintains that general education is universities' philosophy for education, instead of something auxiliary.^[8] In Taiwan, general education has been thriving in not only research-oriented or comprehensive universities but also universities of science and engineering, medical schools, normal schools, and vocational schools. In recent years, some researchers and practitioners in mainland China have also started to explore general education in adult higher education^[9] and vocational education.^[10]

Through the above analysis, this paper believes that general education is not a patent of universities or a specific type of school. Instead, it is intended for everyone. Higher education has gone too far in specialization and vocationalization, resulting in limited scopes of knowledge, narrow visions, and biased thoughts among students. Therefore, it is of significant importance to

⁴ Data source: <http://ls.hkedcity.net>, September 12, 2006. The core subjects during the senior high school are Chinese, English Math and General Education.

emphasize general education at universities. Meanwhile, specialization is a notable feature of higher education, and general education is facing challenges that arise as a result of fast developing specialized education and vocational education. To take up such challenges, universities in different countries or territories, of different types, and at different levels are scrambling to engage in research and practice of general education.

What is the core in the philosophy of general education? What is its objective? The objective of general education in the United States is frequently described in literature as "to cultivate responsible citizens with good manner, with the focus on fostering civic quality and giving students basic values, attitudes, knowledge etc. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, the objective is more often described as "to cultivate all-round people with broad visions". Such a description proposes whole-person education and all-round education. The objective of general education has been described differently in different times, countries, and territories by different universities. For example, Newman's dream was to cultivate well-mannered gentlemen, who could think and judge independently, qualify for any job, master all subjects, and get along with others. They had acute abilities to appreciate as well as remarkable wisdom and talent. They were upfront, fair, and cool-headed. They demonstrated nobleness and modesty in dealing with people and things.^[11]

In Harvard Redbook, the objective of general education was to cultivate socially responsible citizens who could think effectively with the abilities to reason logically, understand relations, imagine things, communicate clearly, make proper judgments, and choose from different values.^[12]

In Rosovsky's opinion, the objective of general education was to cultivate well-mannered people, who: (a) could think and write clearly and effectively; (b) had knowledge and skills in various areas to perceive nature, society, and human beings in a critical way; (c) knew about the cultures of other regions and times with a broad vision; (d) knew and thought about ethical issues, able to make the right moral judgment and choice; (e) did in-depth research into knowledge of a certain area.^[13]

As proposed by Taiwan's education authority, general education is intended to cultivate "complete people", who are not only competent workers but also intellectuals that know about life. They need to understand the nexus of relations between different individuals, between individuals and the social environment, between individuals and nature, etc. They live in the modern society and know how to get along.^[14]

According to Shen Junshan⁵ from National Tsing Hua University in Taiwan, a "complete person" should be an "ideal intellectual" -- this is the profile for an intellectual by the traditional Chinese culture. Such a person should be tolerant of different opinions, capable of objective and critical thinking, able to make rational judgments about values, and good at expressing his or her own thoughts. He or she had better also be able to run the country. In his or her own life, such a person should have the elegant mood of appreciating life and the capability to seek moments of solitude amid the bustle of life. He or she should be able to do self-regulation to strike a harmonious balance in the fast-changing society full of competition. This is the modern version of inner

⁵ Shen Junshan, professor with the Department of Physics, National Tsing Hua University. He was the president of the university between 1994 and 1997. He advocated general education at the university in the 1970s. He worked as the organizer of a panel to formulate Taiwan's policy on general education between 1982 and 1983.

cultivation and exterior action proposed by the Book of Changes.^[15]

The Chinese University of Hong Kong works to cultivate well-mannered well-educated intellectuals. They have a wide scope of knowledge and know the concepts and values of different subjects. They are sensitive to issues that the entire human race is concerned about, they have the right values and the capabilities to judge, and they understand the links between different subjects and the possibility for the subjects to develop in an integrative way. In addition, they have the potential for life-long learning.^[16]

The objective of whole-person education at the University of Hong Kong is to dig deep into students' talent and potential in order to: (a) promote their all-round development; (b) train their language and communication skills (including Chinese, English, and information technology); (c) foster their capabilities of life-long learning and adapting to social and working environments; (d) allow them access to various academic fields through diversified education; (e) open their eyes to the international stage and let them taste different cultures.^[17]

Evidently, the objective of general education has been expressed in different ways in different times and regions, which is closely related to political, economic, cultural, and historical differences. In the United States, there are two most commonly mentioned core concepts for general education -- "independent thinking and judgment" and "socially responsible citizens". The former is about personal development, and the latter is about social responsibility. Involved here is a nexus of relations between individuals and society and between freedom and democracy. Actually, general education in the United States corresponds to the country's democratic ideal of freedom, equality, and human rights, hoping to construct a democratic society based on individual freedom. Iconic pragmatist Dewey thought, despite the apparent contradictions between free individual development and a democratic society, the two are united through responsibility and morality. Freedom for most people comes on condition that most people are socially responsible. If most people are not socially responsible, the society will be ruled by a small number of people, and there will be no democracy.^[18] The key to responsibility is the capabilities to think and judge independently, which make people clear about what is at stake and willing to assume responsibility. Democracy is not only a system but also a necessary value and attitude of citizens. It is a way of life, action, and thinking.^[19]

This paper holds that the objective of general education that cultivates responsible citizens is an expression that fits the features of the US democracy. The civic quality required for democracy not only lies in specialized skills but also calls for general education, which provides basic knowledge and ways of thinking in humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences for people to form values and attitudes of a democratic society, think and judge independently and rationally, participate in and discuss politics, and have strong civic awareness and social responsibility.

By contrast, the core concept in the objective of general education in Taiwan or Hong Kong is to expand visions and cultivate whole or complete people. In Taiwan, universities have long been charged with multiple political missions and economic functions, which put them in a position where they serve to cultivate "utility people". In addition, students are divided into arts classes and sciences classes too early in secondary school, and the college entrance exams are the sole system that calls the final shots. Therefore, general education aims to broaden students' visions and cultivate whole and complete people who are well-mannered and know about both work and

life.^[20] Hong Kong also gives prominence to whole-person education, which emphasizes broadening visions, adapting to changes, understanding cultural diversity, and assuming social responsibility.

Mainland China has a similar environment for general education as Taiwan does: (a) Universities have long been charged with political and economic functions, with too much focus on specialized education; (b) Under the planned economy, universities had little autonomy and lacked subjectivity and a pursuit of university spirits; (c) Exam-oriented education is entrenched in elementary and secondary education and is showing a trend of spreading into higher education, for example, graduate school entrance exams. Therefore, general education should pay extra attention to cultivating complete personality and overcoming the disadvantages brought about by excessive specialization in higher education. Mainland China differs greatly from the United States. The basic political principle in the United States is democracy, equality, and freedom. General education needs to deal with the relations between the democratic society and individuals. The idea is to achieve democracy through individual freedom and require individuals to have the capabilities to think and judge independently. Individuals must be emancipated from ignorance, bias, and parochialism so that they can assume civic responsibility in the democratic society. Mainland China advocates democracy, equality, and collectivism. Therefore, general education needs to deal with the relations between organizations and individuals. Individuals used to be encouraged to sacrifice individual interests for collective interests, and education was based a template, devoid of individuality and creativity. Therefore, general education needs to be individual-based and value the all-round development of people. Education should be freed from excessive uniformity and narrow specialization, paying more attention to the combination of humanities and sciences so as to broaden visions and cultivate complete people who can think and judge independently.

Based on the above analysis, this paper believes the objective of general education in mainland China can be described as "to cultivate complete people" -- thus it is "whole-personality education". In detail, there are two categories of requirements: individual all-round development and social responsibility. On one hand, general education should provide basic knowledge, capabilities, and morality as needed for human beings. On the other hand, as part of the society, each individual should be socially responsible and inclusive of others.

Specialized studies ensure that people have the skills needed to make a living in the society.

In fact, what lies behind general education is how people understand and choose functions for education. As a mandatory activity of the human society, education has two major functions: (a) impacting social development and (b) impacting individual development. Which is to be put first, individual development or social development? Different value orientations lead to different outlooks on the objective of education. One outlook is the individual-based theory, which puts individual values before social values and accentuates the individual need for development. In this theory, the objective of education is determined based on individual development, and education should promote free and all-round development of individuals. The other outlook is the society-based theory, which holds that individual development must cater to social needs and emphasize the political and economic functions of education. In this theory, the objective of education is determined based on social development, and education should provide the society

with people that follow certain social norms, making individuals social and keeping the stability and continuation of the society.^[21] More specifically, one theory suggests that individual development should push social development forward, and the other suggests that social development should drive individual development. The former is more concerned about harmonious all-round development of individuals and proposes liberal education, general education, and humanities education. The latter is more concerned about citizens' morality and political quality,^[22] emphasizing specialized skill education that facilitates social development. In some sense, general education is a kind of education that puts people first, not things or tools first. General education cultivates "complete people", instead of "utility people" that serve the society, economy, politics, or all kinds of utilitarian purposes.

2. General Education as Education Content

A deep understanding of general education is the precondition for implementing general education. Making clear the content of general education is a major step to take general education from an ideal to reality. Otherwise, general education remains a vague and weak concept that is impossible to implement. When people talk about general education, they often mean the content of general education. Then what is the content of general education? Which basic areas of knowledge should it cover?

The content of general education can be understood in a broad sense, an ordinary sense, and a narrow sense, as shown in Figure 1.

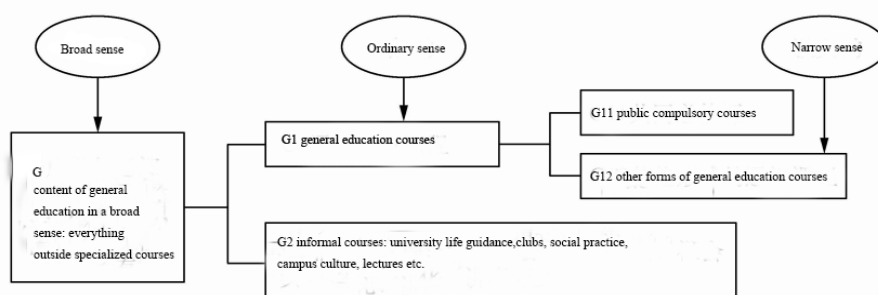


Figure 1. The content of general education

In a broad sense, general education should include all content beyond specialized education. Just as pointed out by Harvard Redbook, education can be roughly divided into two categories: general education and specialized education. General education is neither education for universal knowledge (if this kind of knowledge exists at all) nor the entire content of education. General education normally refers to one part of education that a student receives -- the part that cultivates the student so that he or she can become a responsible citizen.^[23] Put another way, general education in a broad sense includes formal courses (G1) and informal courses (G2), which include club activities, social practice, lectures, campus culture etc. The purpose of G2 is to cultivate complete personality.

The content of general education usually refers to the part of the undergraduate education program that is intended to achieve the objective of general education (G1). Undoubtedly, this is the main

channel and core content for higher education to reflect the philosophy of general education. In the United States, the content of general education also mainly refers to general education courses that are outside the specialized education that students major in.

In a narrow sense, the content of general education only refers to the courses for general education (G12). In mainland China and Taiwan, universities set elective courses for general education when they first start to implement general education. The courses often carry 6 to 8 credits. Therefore, some people equal general education to the elective courses for general education. Actually, just a small number of elective courses are inadequate for achieving the objective of cultivating complete people. Therefore, it is not desirable to understand the content of general education in this narrow sense.

According to general education's objective of cultivating complete people, the content (courses) of general education should cover the basics of humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. That includes language, math, literature, arts, history, culture, ethical thinking, technology etc. In teaching practice, more attention should be paid to cultivating personality, training thoughts, and instructing students on methods. This is the basis for follow-up specialized education, the answer to the need for adapting to social changes, and the fundamental requirement for being complete people.^[24]

3. General Education as a Model for Cultivating Talents

The model discussed here is not a uniform template or standard for general education. Instead, it means that a system needs to be set up to ensure that the philosophy of general education is reflected in the content and methodology of teaching, thereby guaranteeing that the objective of general education is achieved. This way, a standardized model for cultivating talents is formulated. In other words, the model is an institutional reflection of the philosophy and content of education. In the case of general education, a series of supporting measures and systems must be in place once the philosophy and content of general education are made clear. This is the only way to go if general education is to transit from theory into a model for cultivating talents. Then, general education can get rid of the difficulties that it is mired in, such as a low position and hard implementation. When this is done, the objective of general education is really achieved.

The general education model is called this way as opposed to the specialized education model. Universities always have general education and specialized education, which complement each other to form the whole of higher education. However, as two talent cultivating models, general education and specialized education are quite different (see Table 1)⁶. It can be seen that the two talent cultivating models differ significantly in education philosophy, education content, and education methods.

Table 1 Comparison between the general education and the specialized education models

Aspect	General education (United States)	Specialized education (former Soviet Union)
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⁶ The general education models of the United States and the former Soviet Union were chosen, because they are quite typical. Data source: the table on Page 66 of Theory of General Education by Yang Dongping, Liaoning Education Publishing House, 1989.

Education philosophy and objective	Putting individual development first, individualism and democratism	Putting social development first, collectivism and nationalism
	Emphasizing people's coordinated development and capability training for complete people	Emphasizing people's intellectual development and knowledge transfer, cultivating utility people who can only work
	Intended to lay a foundation and prepare for career	Intended to train highly skilled experts
Education content and method	Giving equal emphasis to humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, valuing the integration between science and engineering and the interplay between arts and sciences	Paying extra attention to natural sciences, preferring sciences to arts
	Focusing on basic education, with a wide scope of knowledge and strong adaptability	Focusing on specialized education, with a narrow scope of knowledge and strong pragmatism
	Centered on students and the society	Centered on the classroom and subjects
	Valuing research, promoting studies through research and practice	Mainly relying on classroom teaching
Cultivation system etc.	Using a credit system, which provides flexibility	Using a school-year system, which ensures strict and uniform teaching management
	Giving prominence to comprehensive universities, providing diversified management systems	Mainly relying on specialized colleges under the management of industrial ministries

In mainland China, to establish a general education model is far more difficult than to discuss the philosophy of general education. Since the former Soviet Union set up the system for specialized education in China, cultivating specialized talents has been reflected everywhere at universities: education philosophy, curriculums, content and methodology of teaching, cultivation systems, operation mechanisms, and organizational structures. On the surface, general education is about setting some relevant courses and activities. In essence, in-depth implementation of general education will surely involve reforms in the talent cultivating model and the university system.

III. Conclusion

The philosophy, content, and model of general education mutually affect one another, as shown in Figure 2. If the philosophy of general education is a beautiful ideal, then the content and system of general education are the key to materializing that ideal, which will finally become institutionalized as a talent cultivating model.

Considering the three aspects, the relations between specialized education and general education are as follows: As the philosophy for higher education, general education includes specialized education. As part of higher education, general education goes hand in hand with specialized education. They are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they must coexist to construct the whole of

undergraduate education. As talent cultivating models, general education and specialized education are called so just to be distinguished from one another. They are not mutually opposing. In any model, general education and specialized education both exist. Their difference lies in the standpoint for cultivating talents. General education emphasizes putting people first and pursuing all-round development, while specialized education emphasizes meeting the society's needs and developing skills that help make a living. Actually, if specialized education just enables students to have a good career and lead a cozy life, without adequate responsibility for the society and the entire human race, specialized education is incomplete. If general education fails to give a good career and life to educated people, general education is defective.

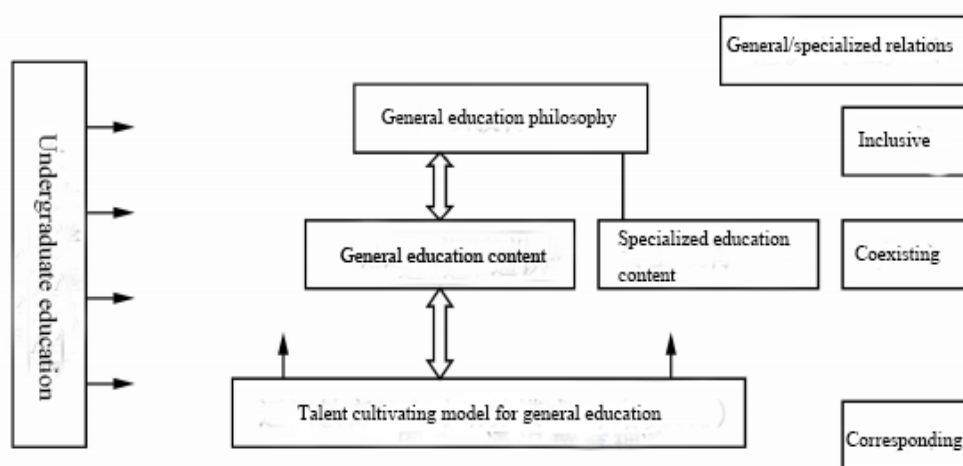


Figure 2 Relations between the philosophy, content, and model of general education

Higher education should be an organic combination of general education content and specialized education content under the guidance of general education's philosophy.

Considering general education from the three aspects, universities of different types at different levels can be explained as follows: In terms of philosophy, general education applies to everyone and every university. Becoming a complete person is everyone's lifetime goal. However, in terms of content, universities of different types at different levels can implement general education in different ways and to different degrees. Some elite universities can spend two years providing a large number of general education courses and finish specialized education in postgraduate years. At vocational schools, it is acceptable if they just provide students with a few general education courses. The key is to ensure that students, while mastering necessary skills, learn how to think about problems, solve problems in comprehensive and complete ways and how to behave in good manners, instead of becoming "robots". In terms of models, different universities can have their own unique features in general education. There is no need for uniform standards.

In the practice of general education, mixing its philosophy, content, and model or failing to figure out the relations between these three aspects easily leads to misunderstandings about general education. If all attention is paid to the philosophy and general education is depicted as a beautiful ideal, the implementation of its content and the support from the system are ignored, making general education an unreachable delusion. If general education is understood only from its

content, general education is thought to be just some elective courses, common sense, or cultural and sports activities. This is superficial and far from the essence of general education. If there is no recognition that the implementation of general education requires a transformation of the talent cultivating model, policy and measures are inadequate, and general education is unlikely to go deep and last long.

This paper believes that the right understanding of the essence of general education cannot stop at the beautiful philosophy or simplified as a few general education courses. General education cannot be generalized as mastering all knowledge, nor can it be relegated to studies for ordinary knowledge and practical skills. The right way to understand it is to consider three aspects: philosophy, content, and model. Only by doing this can one really know about the rich essence of general education, look at the relations between the ideal and reality of general education, and deeply comprehend the straits general education is in.

With only philosophy, general education is empty. With only content, general education is superficial. Without being a model, general education cannot be enduring.

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