

GENERAL EDUCATION FOR STUDENT'S DEVELOPMENT: A CASE STUDY IN OMAN

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ABSTRACT

Using the example of the Centre for Preparatory Studies at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman, this paper explores to what extent foundation program courses in the country's higher education institutions impart principles and standards of General Education intended for empowering our students and developing them as personalities. In particular, it critically examines source materials and current practice relating to some important internal factors that influence the acquisition of knowledge and skills, including the Centre's infrastructure, facilities, strategies and policies, faculty, students, teaching methodology and pedagogy, courses, as well as presence and implementation of General Education principles and standards in some selected courses in language skills, basic mathematics, information technology and study skills. The findings reveal that by bringing these issues into discussion as well as by sharing diverse experiences and perspectives of the Centre, they will meet the needs of higher education in all the MENA region states, provide insights that could inform decisions and help improve running of the foundation programs in Oman.

Keywords: General Education, Principles, Foundation Program, Sultan Qaboos University

INTRODUCTION

The concept of General Education is commonly referred to “educational programs (as practiced in some liberal-art colleges and secondary schools) that intend to transmit cultural knowledge and develop students as personalities rather than trained specialists” (General education, 2016, n.p.). It was constructed as a response to both the need to strengthen the coherence of curriculum for it to reliably serve as a medium that educates people, attends to their experiences and feelings, and the need to enhance the quality of higher education teaching and learning (Austin, 2011, n.p.). This understanding is inseparable from a prospect stated by United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-moon (2012) suggesting that education is a major impetus in human progress and development that “empowers people with the knowledge, skills and values needed to build a better world” (n.p.).

At the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS) of Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman General Education is considered a foundation for higher education and advanced learning. It is also viewed as a medium that develops our students as personalities. Hence, this paper mainly focuses on the teaching and learning and the other related areas linked with these processes. In this attempt, first, it reviews the literature of General Education. This review opens up many windows through which we can gain a better view of General Education, and principles and standards that guide the courses in General Education. To further support our understanding of General Education programs, a couple of case studies would be examined briefly. Also, the review assists us in focusing on SQU mission, in general, and the mission of the CPS, in particular. The review also includes the examination of the General Education programs in the MENA region and the world outside MENA states. Then, the CPS will be examined using the archival research methodology (L'Eplattenier, 2009) to verify to what

extent General Education principles and standards are implemented in the general foundation program. Then, findings and results of the data thus obtained and the discussion and implications are presented. The paper concludes with a note of the step forward.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A concept of General Education

Initially generalized in the United States, an abstract idea of General Education was later adopted by many secondary and higher education schools across the globe (Craig, H.1988), where it implies multiple interpretations, allowing educational institutions modify it based on their vision and mission. To exemplify, in some educational contexts, General Education is understood as “a variety of disciplines that build a common foundation of knowledge that promotes responsibility, critical thinking and lifelong, independent learning” (General education requirements, 2012, n.p.). Other educational providers refer General Education to “the educational foundation of skills, knowledge, habits of mind, and values that prepares students for success in their majors and in their personal and professional lives after graduation” (What is general education, 2017, n.p.). General Education is also defined as “the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that all of us use and live by during most of our lives - whether as parents, citizens, lovers, travelers, participants in the arts, leaders, volunteers or good Samaritans” (Gaff, 1994, p.4).

There has always been an issue of quality of education. Boyer (1983), for example, listing some recommendations for improving the quality of education, argues that the “future of any nation depends on the quality of that nation's public education” (p.7). Goodlad (1984) also expresses concern about the quality of public school education and its articulation within the college experience. There is, has been and will doubtless continue to be an increasing concern about quality at all levels of public education in the developed, developing and underdeveloped nations. These concerns are as old as the Yale Report of 1828 (Hofstadter & Smith, 1961, p.275). This report gave heart to the academic conservative everywhere, by declaring that a prescribed curriculum, featuring the thorough study of the ancient languages, was the only proper system for a college. According to C. Barnabas Charles (2007), the authors of the report “further noted that the study of the classics was useful, not only to lay the foundation for correct taste, and furnish the student with those ideas which were found in the literature of modern times, but as a study to form the most effectual discipline of mental faculties” (p.11). Since the Yale Report, there have been several periods of curricular reform in American history (C Barnabas, 2007), and at least, three periods in the twentieth century, when General Education became the special domain of curricular discussions (Boyer & Hechinger, 1981). All these periods correspond to the time immediately preceding and following the two World Wars. Nevertheless, the period from 1975 to the present has been marked by an intense interest in General Education and in restoring integrity to the undergraduate curriculum through a generally broad and in some cases, liberal education.

Liberal Education is an approach to learning that aims at empowering and preparing individuals to deal with complexity, diversity, and change (What Is a 21st Century Liberal Education, 1998, n.p.). Students can also benefit by gaining a broader knowledge of the world in areas like science, culture, and society, as well as being able to do an in-depth study in their specific area of interest. Furthermore, students develop a sense of social responsibility, as well as strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills. For example, communication, analytical and problem-solving skills, and a demonstrated ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings.

Initially, the distinction between Liberal Education and Liberal Arts Education, was unclear. However, over a period of time, Liberal Arts Education and Liberal Education, got merged with General Education. Today, to many educators, General Education also means Liberal Arts Education (Benefits of a liberal arts education, 2013, n.p.). It usually includes a General Education curriculum that assists broad learning in many disciplines, along with an in-depth study for a major. Thus, it helps students develop a sense of social responsibility along with strong intellectual and practical skills, which they will need throughout their lives (Kimball, 2010).

As claimed in the statement on Liberal Education by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (What is a 21st century liberal education, 1998.), the nature and implementation of Liberal Education in the twentieth and twenty-first century are different with a clear trend to merging of Liberal and General Education features and core characteristics (n.p.). For example, though in both time periods the aim of Liberal Education is intellectual and personal development, it was considered a non-vocation option for the fortunate in the twentieth century, whereas in the twenty-first century it is viewed as a necessity for success in a global economy, essential for all students' informed citizenship. Additionally, Liberal Education in the twentieth century was offered through studies in Arts and Science disciplines ("the major") and/or through General Education in the initial years at college; in the twenty first century, it is an essential part of the curricula at all schools, community colleges, colleges, and universities, and is recommended across all fields of study. Therefore, the concepts of General Education and Liberal Arts Education, will be used interchangeably hereafter.

There is little agreement in current research on what constitutes a viable General Education program for any given institution, in spite of the innumerable efforts exercised in designing such programs. To exemplify, a program in General Education in Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, aims at preparing students for civic engagement, teaching them to understand themselves as products of, and participants in, traditions of art, ideas, and values while enabling them to respond critically and constructively to change. Consequently, Harvard College's General Education courses help students to understand the deep relationship of scholarly work to some of the most important aspects of life beyond college, and aim to produce practical wisdom. With these objectives in the forefront, the college offers courses under different themes, including principles of economics, comparative literature, introduction to quantitative methods, and others. These courses transcend interdisciplinary boundaries in order to prepare students for meaningful lives of civic and ethical engagement in an ever changing world. (Harvard University, 2017). General Education courses at Algonquin College in Perth, Canada, are offered to help students gain a wider view of the world by enrolling in courses that are outside their chosen majors. General Education courses are offered under five themes which are arts in society, civic life, social and cultural understanding, personal understanding, and science and technology (Algonquin College, 2017). The approach to teaching and learning at the Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts in India aims to develop the students from all angles, take care of their intellect, emotions, ethics and world vision which is balanced and positive. Its objectives also include developing students' thirst for knowledge and understanding of the world, and readiness to face challenges with poise and confidence. The learning methodology includes interactive seminars, group discussions, team learning through projects and assignments, art, music self-learning through library reference and apprenticeships/ internships, audio-visual, guest lectures and workshops (Symbiosis School for Liberal Arts, 2017, n.p.).

Indeed, on the whole, General Education courses mainly aim at preparing students as personalities and focus on life beyond the classroom. Currently existing disagreements are for the most part about its content, structure, process and implementation, covering a wide spectrum of curricular philosophies and institutional types. In spite of these disagreements, General Education pays attention to what might be called ‘shared cultural values’. It basically includes a common history, political and economic attitudes, common language, and a common vision of the future (Knowledge-based society, education and culture, 2017).

Principles of General Education

The range of definitions of General Education revolves around its fundamental principles and an ultimate task to prepare citizens who are self-reliant and responsible in their thoughts and deeds, in a changing and diverse modern-day world (Gaff, 1994). General Education programs’ stakeholders, i.e. administrators, faculty, students, and community members at various educational institutions, have constantly revisited the existing programs and tried to define the underlying fundamentals of General Education that meet the demands of the modern world with all its complexity and diversity (Townsend & Twombly, 2001).

Today, an educated person is an individual who possesses “broad knowledge in history and culture, mathematics and science, the ability to think logically and critically, the capacity to express ideas clearly, the sensitivities and interests, and the capability to work independently and collaboratively” (Gaff, 1994, p. 2). To educate such an individual, General Education focuses on such core areas for its objectives, as effective communication, quantitative reasoning and computer literacy (Gaff, 1994) These three areas, in their turn, are constructed on such pillars, as (1) breadth of knowledge; (2) critical thinking; (3) integration of knowledge; (4) social responsibilities (Gaff, 1994) Based on the core areas and their pillars, the standards or principles of General Education can be stated as follows: (a) General Education curriculum requires that students acquire and practice the following foundational skills: write effectively in English, communicate in a language other than English, master problem solving, speak effectively before an audience, evaluate and synthesize researched information and write effectively within one’s discipline; (b) General Education curriculum requires that students acquire the ability to express themselves effectively and creatively, think critically, differentiate and formulate values, interact with others, and understand the world from various viewpoints; (c) Study of science, technology, humanities, arts, and social sciences builds the students’ knowledge about human behaviour, diversity of people and cultures; (d) Dynamic General Education nurtures individual and social responsibilities, accountability, reasoning, application of knowledge in a real context and interaction with diverse cultures. Thus prepared, students will be able to exercise their social responsibilities at the local, national, and global levels; (e) Building upon foundational skills, synthesis of knowledge, and development of social responsibility, the experiential components of General Education serve as an integrated and applied learning opportunity (Hart Research Associates, 2015).

Some commonly shared skills, knowledge and learning outcomes in a General Education programs include, but are not limited to such skills, as writing skill, quantitative reasoning skills, critical thinking and analytic reasoning skills, knowledge of mathematics, knowledge of science, knowledge of humanities, knowledge of global world cultures, knowledge of arts, knowledge of social sciences, intercultural skills and abilities, information literacy skills, ethical reasoning skills, civic engagement and competence, knowledge of sustainability, knowledge of technology, etc. (Hart Research Associates, 2016). With these clearly stated

principles, core areas, their pillars and the skills to develop through the General Education courses, it is important to look at the current situation of General Education across the globe.

General Education in the global education environment

The emergence of new digital technologies, globalization of world economies and political and social changes, have led to modifications in the objectives of education in the twenty first century. The conditions, under which educational systems contribute to economic and social development, have also changed. As stated in Jones (2005), a Liberal Education is the foundation for success in every growing occupation (n.p.). It is perceived as a way to intellectual and personal development which is a necessity for all students and is vital for the success of the global economy and informed citizenship. This situation clearly indicates the momentum General Education is gaining these days, and Middle Eastern and North African countries, namely, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates and Yemen, are no exception.

General Education is the “road not traveled for education reform” in the MENA region countries (The road not traveled, 2008), and this sector of education systems must now travel over new and relatively unexplored paths. For example, similar to education institutions in other parts of the world, students’ level of engagement with General Education and their grasp of its goals are a challenge (The road not traveled, 2008). Indeed, there are many contributing factors that set the stage for the developmental growth of citizens of MENA region. These include increasing knowledge (e.g., education, skills, information and know-how, its renewal and application); diversified educational opportunities; lifelong learning (e.g. a formal education that provides all individuals with opportunities to acquire a fundamental level of instruction; knowledge of more than one foreign language; pedagogical reforms. (e.g., student-centered learning, competency-based curricula, and focus on critical thinking) (The road not traveled, 2008). However, there is an on-going argument that “the impact on development of the considerable education progress recorded in the region has been less than expected in terms of economic growth, the promotion of equality, and reduction of poverty” (The road not traveled, 2008, p.85). The set of challenges facing the education sector in MENA are related to the lack of skilled laborers and the lack of a technically skilled work force, increased pressure on educational systems due to the student intake growth, with no or little change in subjects and skills taught (Tuzlukova, Al-Busaidi & Burns, 2017).

Additionally, only one foreign language, English, is taught; other languages are offered only in some contexts but they are optional. Moreover, there is little evidence of a significant shift away from a traditional model of pedagogy. The main activities in the classrooms in MENA are teacher-centered rather than student-centered. For example, according to Alrashidi and Phan (2015), in the Saudi Arabian academic context, the learning process is dominated by teachers who act as the main source of knowledge and information (p.38). Group work, creative thinking, and proactive learning are rare. Frontal teaching is still a dominant feature, even in countries that have introduced learner-centered pedagogy. Writing, copying from the board, listening to teachers are dominant classroom activities (Fareh, 2010; Alkubaidi, 2014), causing students to be receptors, memorizers and reproducers (Al Rabai, 2014).

According to the UNESCO report on MENA and GCC countries (UNESCO, 2003a), some aspects of the new paths that education systems must traverse have been shaped by the education system itself. In this context, MENA countries have succeeded in providing most eligible children with educational opportunities, thus narrowing gender, rural, and socio-

economic gaps in access to schooling. However, the outcome of this success has remained minimum in terms of producing skilled knowledgeable citizens. Therefore, since education is the main source of knowledge creation, the education systems in MENA region countries must be changed to deliver the new skills and expertise necessary for students to excel in a more competitive environment. As well as that, the student body, supported by the education systems, needs to be ready to contribute to national development.

In the past, the MENA region allocated a lion's share of the budget to improve the quality of education. It continues to focus mainly on the quality of education to meet the local and global demands of the job markets. Unfortunately, the region still faces old and new challenges. As stated in the UNESCO report on higher education in the Arab Region (UNESCO, 2003b), these include globalization, limited knowledge, high demand for job related skills, additional languages in schools, teaching pedagogy, and demographic profiles. In spite of this criticism, MENA countries' education systems do have plans to (a) offer more learning opportunities in science and humanities, with practical experience that needs specific skills; (b) consider cost-effective methods to offer quality education; (c) give more attention to subjects like literacy and numeracy; (d) focus more on transversal skills that enable citizens to better adapt to an evolving labor market, society, and policy; (e) encourage teaching and learning foreign languages other than English, and make them mandatory; (f) give more opportunities to learning by doing; (g) introduce discovery learning, project and problem based learning that needs implementation; (h) encourage interactive approaches to teaching. Therefore, if MENA region countries want to compete with the rest of the world, meeting the existing challenges is fundamental to their educational systems. Consequently, one possible solution to this end seems to be the introduction or improvement of General Education which focuses on producing competent and flexible humans who are on a par with the rest of the world.

General Education: The Specific Context of Oman

Education offered in any context depends on the vision and the mission of the institution offering education, especially when it concerns General Education. An important elements of Oman's Ministry of Higher Education Vision is "to ensure quality higher education that meets the requirements for sustainable development" (Ministry of higher education, 2017). The mission statement of the Ministry highlights promoting a higher education system that "a) keeps pace with developments and changes in today's world, b) meets the requirements of sustainable development in the Knowledge Era, while preserving the cultural identity of Omani society and c) contributes to the progress and development of humankind" (Ministry of higher education, 2017).

There is one public university and fourteen higher education institutions, seven private universities and twenty-three private higher education institutions in Oman (Ministry of higher education, 2017). Sultan Qaboos University is the leading public university and an "established centre of knowledge and expertise in fields that relate to Omani culture and national development, as well as a wide range of academic disciplines" (Ministry of higher education, 2017) that opened its doors to its first students in 1986. Now, it has nine colleges and ten centres to support teaching and learning, as well as ten research centres to promote research and learning. The Centre for Preparatory Studies is the Centre which offers diverse English language courses and a general foundation program at the university.

General foundation programs are formal, structured programs of study licensed in the Sultanate of Oman that are aimed at "developing literacy, numeracy, computing and learning skills, allowing Omani students a pathway into their institutions and preparing them for their

future academic studies” (Al Busaidi & Tuzlukova, 2013, p.9). Based on the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) guidelines for the exit standards of GFP (Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs, 2010), the foundation program English language (FPEL) curriculum is carefully sequenced to help students achieve the learning outcomes of one level and provide them with the skills required to perform adequately at the next level. Various courses at each level are required to prepare students for the competencies needed at the next higher level. Its vision involves providing “a creative, co-operative and flexible environment in which students and staff can learn, grow and fulfill their potential” (Centre for Preparatory Studies, 2017, n.p.). According to its mission statement, the Centre for Preparatory Studies (CPS) is “committed to providing a high quality preparatory program that develops students’ knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for success in their colleges” (The virtual center for preparatory studies, 2017, n.p.).

The main objective of the foundation program offered by the CPS is to prepare students for undergraduate education. The program is designed to (a) equip students with the required knowledge and skills necessary for undertaking university education; (b) provide students with sufficient analytical skills and knowledge in their areas of study; (c) improve the efficiency of teaching and learning in the classroom through students’ independent study, and (d) provide quality education in English language, Arabic language, mathematics, information technology, and life skills (The virtual center for preparatory studies, 2017, n.p.).

The CPS is a student focused educational institution that supports reflective practices. Students are placed at the core of its activities. These activities emphasize students’ independence, responsibility for learning, academic and social development. Integration of knowledge and practice is one of the CPS’s key values. Its faculty constantly apply the most effective teaching methodologies in their teaching. However, from methodological, contextual and practical perspectives, it’s important to explore to what extent the foundation courses offered by the CPS impart principles and standards of General Education to empower our students and develop them as personalities.

METHODOLOGY OF STUDY

The study involved descriptive research design. The data is based on archival research methodology (L’Eplattenier, 2009) that included written records and self-reports, as well as internal unstructured observations (Given, 2008) of a wide range of behaviors and situations in the setting of the CPS. In detail, such areas as the curriculum document, the support systems, program evaluation reports, assessment records, university and Centre’s policies and general foundation programs’ standards document were examined to assess the current General Education system at the Centre.

FINDINGS

The Curriculum: GE principles and the CPS General Foundation Program (GFP)

The Centre for Preparatory Studies implements the general foundation program which includes English language, mathematics, information technology and general study skills. The learning outcomes of these four components of the GFP are specified by OAAA (Oman Academic Standards for General Foundation Programs, 2010). Thus, the core areas of General Education, such as effective communication, quantitative reasoning, and computer literacy are embedded in the foundation program curriculum at Sultan Qaboos University. These core areas are sustained by the breadth of knowledge, development of the critical thinking, integration of knowledge, and inculcation of social responsibilities. General Education principles and standards, and general foundation program standards as our take off points, we analysed our teaching and learning aspects to see whether we have General

Education standards in place as guiding factors to prepare our students as well educated citizens and personalities. In this process, the following ten important principles that “give more substance and authority to general education” (Gaff, 1994, p.3) have been considered: effective communication; quantitative reasoning; computer technology and literacy; content knowledge enhancement; critical thinking; integration of knowledge; teaching social responsibilities; study skills and knowledge application; educating students about global and local cultures; intercultural skills and abilities.

Effective communication

The foundation program English language courses aim at enhancing students’ effective communication skills in academic writing and speaking. Students are expected to be able to state their ideas clearly through their writing assignments and speaking tasks, such as everyday communication, discussion tasks, and presentations. To illustrate, the Comprehensive Curriculum Document (2017) states that “students are given plenty of opportunities for group/pair speaking tasks to develop confidence and fluency, with accuracy considered as a follow-up activity. Although oral fluency is the primary goal, accuracy in speaking should be recognised and rewarded” (p.21). In addition to classroom opportunities, students get more opportunities to further improve their communication skills through the extracurricular activities. The Extra Curricular Activities (ECA) unit runs various clubs throughout the semester, for students to participate, for example, Speaking Club, Cultural Exchange Club, Debate Club, and others.

Quantitative reasoning

Some principles of General Education are also reflected in the math curriculum that is implemented by the CPS. These are the principles of the importance of developing critical thinking and integration of knowledge. The mission statement of the foundation program states that it is committed to train students in basic mathematical strategies and skills which will enable them to solve problems in real life situations. The program prepares the students for higher studies in their majors. It aims at developing students’ “problem solving abilities, exposing students to various applications of basic mathematics in real world problems and promoting self-learning” (Comprehensive Curriculum Document, 2017, p.142). To exemplify, the input materials used in the English language teaching include tables, graphs, charts, pictures and diagrams. Students need to analyse the data thus presented and infer major findings with reasons.

Computer technology and literacy

It is important for a university student to have the basic computer skills in order to use the skills in the learning process during his stay in the university. The students are taught all the necessary skills to be able to use the computer effectively throughout their university years. The computer skills include office application, file management and computer operation, internet and net world using and general knowledge of computer theory (Comprehensive Curriculum Document, 2017). Information technology courses are mainly based on a hands-on experience approach, and are thus heavily dependent on computer labs where inputs are given and immediately students apply the skills learnt through the inputs. The mathematics and computer science curricula also contain the study skill element that promotes students’ time management, research skills, ability to work in groups, etc. (Comprehensive Curriculum Document, 2017). These computer skills are also applied in their writing courses and math courses. Assessment records show students are acquiring the computer skills to a good extent but application of these skills in other areas needs more practice.

Content knowledge enhancement

The content used in all the courses offered under the foundation program is based on local and global topics. Commercial books give good exposure to students for gaining understanding of different cultures, developments, problems the world is facing, roles and responsibilities of various organizations, etc. In addition to the commercial books, the CPS also develops in-house materials to enhance knowledge, grammar vocabulary and comprehension of various topics. Especially, in the CPS's exit English course, topics cover a wide range of themes in local and global contexts. The Extra Curricula Activities culture club at the CPS gives a good opportunity to students to know the culture of different countries and also learn communication skills through the knowledge they gain by participating in these clubs.

Critical thinking

In addition to the breadth and integration of knowledge, the other objectives of the General Education curriculum are to train students to become critical thinkers and life-long learners, who can work individually and collaboratively. Students who are studying the general foundation program at the CPS are engaged in tasks that promote their responsibility for their own learning and enhance team-work skills. Students undertake individual or group research projects in the topic of their choice, the successful accomplishment of which greatly depends on each student's ability to work as a team member and therefore be accountable for the common success of the project. In these projects they learn interpersonal skills, critical thinking skills and effective communication skills while doing research, working towards deadlines, keeping a portfolio, and giving presentations about the completed project. At the same time, they acquire and practice these skills for life-long learning. such as time management, effective communication.

Integration of knowledge

Knowledge gained through classroom instruction of one area, sometimes needs to be used in other areas. One example of this is when students' computer skills are applied in their project work; however, it is not just the application within the courses, these skills should extend to life outside classroom. Additionally, our speaking and debate topics are drawn from real life experiences and students' projects are expected to reflect their integration of knowledge.

Teaching social responsibilities

Directly and indirectly, the CPS curriculum includes inculcating social responsibilities in its students through various activities. Classroom tasks focus on pair work, group work, team work in which students participate and learn to understand their roles and responsibilities. These skills can, later, be applied in real life. The topics for speaking, presentations and projects are mostly based on local and global issues. Working on such topics lends itself to students' better understanding the roles and responsibilities of various people in the society. Field trips, seminars, educational tours and community-based projects also contribute in understanding what they need to do in society in order to have a developed and peaceful nation.

Study skills and knowledge application

The study skills component in the general foundation program courses aims at preparing students to organize their time, prioritize their work and be responsible. The study skills curricula of the program take a holistic approach towards its preparation of students. Students are expected to graduate from the program as individuals with both an adequate breadth of knowledge of the subject matter (the English language and skills) and the skills vital to their

success in higher studies and life outside the boundaries of the classroom. The application of the skills acquired is central to all other standards of General Education because, if acquired skills are not applied outside classrooms, then General Education becomes insignificant and these programs will only serve as certification. The CPS curriculum takes into account this principle and provides opportunities to students to apply acquired skills in classroom tasks and simulated real world tasks. Some examples of these tasks include debates, team work and problem solving tasks prepare students to think and face any situation by applying the knowledge and skills learnt through the general education courses.

Educating students about local and global cultures

In the globalized world, knowledge of local and global cultures is an important factor in social mobility, travel, information sharing, communication and such other areas. Exposure to global cultures is an important point in general education courses. At the CPS, in put materials are a good mix of local and global topics. Also, the Extra Curricula Activities unit at the CPS, organizes culture clubs in which teachers from different countries will showcase their culture through several activities including dress, language, polite forms, food, festivals etc. Interaction between teachers and students is the focus of these culture club activities.

Inter-cultural communication skills and abilities

At the CPS, regular interactions between teachers who represent 26 different countries and students who are mostly Omani students with some international students from the Gulf and Arab countries provide a platform for students and teachers to develop inter-cultural skills. Culture club activities also support in developing these skills. Gradually, students develop the abilities required to communicate with anybody from any country. Students from other countries visit Sultan Qaboos University, and Omani students sometimes have the opportunity to meet and talk with these visiting students. This enables the Omani students to understand other cultures better.

Discussion and implications

After going through all the documents available for analyzing and tracing General Education principles in the teaching/learning context at the CPS, it appears that most of these principles are followed and standards are maintained. The evidence and the shortcomings noticed in the process are discussed in this section.

Teaching at the CPS is mainly focused on achieving stated learning outcomes. Periodically these learning outcomes are revisited and revised according to the needs of the students and the revised general foundation program standards. Also, periodically, the evaluation of the foundation program will be conducted either by an external agent or internally. These evaluation reports help us identify the gaps in our learning outcomes, materials, approaches to teaching/learning and assessment procedures.

Assessment records shows that criteria for assessing the communication skills of the students have been developed. Assessment records reveal that students acquire the communication skills fairly well. However, in spite of the undertaken revisions to this effect, providing more opportunities to make students' communication more accurate and effective is still needed.

Regarding developing critical thinking and integration of knowledge, curriculum put its efforts in including critical thinking skills in almost all materials (Comprehensive Curriculum Document, 2017). But a proper framework to develop critical thing skills has not been implemented yet. This area needs more focus in triggering the thinking skills in our students.

There is evident teachers' pursuit in helping students gain apprenticeship into new technology-mediated discourse communities, creating opportunities for authentic and meaningful interaction both within and outside the classroom (Tuzlukova & Ginosyan, 2016). Computer skills are integrated into writing and portfolio components. To some extent students are able to fit into blended learning situation but they lack application of computer skills to skillfully apply them in writing and portfolio components. This necessitates placing the focus on application of skills or transferring skills among different disciplines to make our students think critically and apply skills in learning and also in real life. As for the portfolio component, online tasks and activities initiated and implemented on some courses and in the Extra Curricula Activities Unit, and Tutorial/Writing Centers at the CPS, are very successful, enabling our students to progress towards a degree of autonomy in their learning. The autonomy thus gained encourages social responsibility and responsible citizenry.

The opportunities provided for students to understand their role in the society are obliquely embedded in the curriculum. There is an urgent need to make it direct. The academic and administrative staff at the Centre for Preparatory Studies is comprised of professionals of over 30 nationalities giving it a multicultural and global environment. In addition, students are provided valuable exposure to a wide range of cultural backgrounds and dialects of English. Still, students need more opportunities to cross the frontiers and get exposed to the world outside their country. More work in this area is under consideration, and, though the merits outweigh the demerits in achieving General Education objectives, some challenges are still in place. These include, but are not limited to effects of globalization, limited knowledge, high demand of job related skills, additional languages in schools, teaching pedagogy, lack of motivation, and infrastructure.

Globalization

Globalization as a phenomenon that changes the fundamentals of any development strategy poses challenges for the development of the educational systems and progress of our students. One of the most important consequences of this overall trend is that knowledge, including education, skills, information, and know-how, and its renewal and application, have become important factors for sustaining global competitiveness and economic growth. For example, while examining Omani students' ability to take responsibility for their own learning and intrinsic motivation, Burns (2013) contends that "they have yet to develop a thirst for knowledge and require extrinsic motivation to keep them moving forward" (p.33). According to Burns (2013), "this is reflected in their limited world knowledge" (p.33).

Limited content knowledge

Today's world is characterized by intense global competition and rapid technological change. A well-educated, technically skilled workforce is the key to success in such a competitive world. First, the nation must be able to produce the broadest possible human capital base. If knowledge is increasingly recognized as the key to competitiveness, it follows that the more people that have a fundamental level of instruction, the better. Also an individual's knowledge base must continuously change and progress.

High demand for job related skills

There is a need to equip students with complex critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as practical knowledge essential for functioning in the labour market. This observation complies with Gaff (1994) who believes that it is "the task of general education to prepare students to develop lifelong competencies such as critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, quantitative reasoning, and problem solving" (p.10).

Additional languages in schools

Another challenge facing the education system is introducing the teaching of one or two foreign languages. The acquisition of another language clearly enlarges the opportunity for an individual to work wherever he/she wants to work. It also increases social mobility leading to an increase in knowledge and experience and is a useful marketing and practical tool to increase an individual's potential in the labour market.

Teaching pedagogy

In spite of the implementation of shifting paradigms (Teaching implications of shifting pedagogy, 2014, n.p.) in language teaching pedagogy at the CPS and the promotion of group work, creative and critical thinking, and pro-active learning, the lecture mode dominates some classroom teaching. This inevitably leads to narrowing students' way of looking at personal responsibilities and missing their voices (Al Saadi, 2011). As well as that, such mode of teaching can limit pedagogical conditions necessary for building and extending students' skills through learning and for promoting their linguistic, critical and reflective competencies.

Lack of motivation

The analysis of the CPS' written records and self-reports, and our observations show that learning is more grade/mark oriented than effort oriented. It is indeed an uphill task to motivate students to understand the importance of education other than just getting a certificate.

Infrastructure

Due to the growing student intake, infrastructure facilities need to expand proportionately. This includes, for example, the need to expand the CPS Writing and Tutorial Centres.

Meeting the above challenges is fundamental to the educational systems if we want to compete with the rest of the world. One possible solution to this end seems to be the introduction or improvement of General Education which focuses on producing competent and flexible humans who are on a par with the rest of the world. From the literature review, it is evident that for the CPS foundation program to be more successful, stronger foundations for General Education that is "an organic whole whose parts join in expounding a ruling idea and in serving a common aim" (Gaff, 1994, p. 9) should be created.

CONCLUSION

The need to revive the General Education programs has been felt in the MENA region, and it is a step forward towards the development of personalities with adequate skills who can effectively participate in the progress of their countries. Keeping the General Education standards and principles in the forefront, the foundation program at the Center for Preparatory Studies of Sultan Qaboos University takes a holistic approach towards its preparation of students. Students are expected to graduate from the program as individuals with both an adequate breadth of knowledge of the subject matter, for example, the English language and skills, math and information technology, and the skills vital to their success in higher studies and life outside the borders of the classroom. The Centre for Preparatory Studies also gives importance to the periodical evaluation of its foundation program either by an external agency or internal committee. Based on the findings of these reports, revisions as required are undertaken and implemented. However, more revisions and inclusions need to be considered in some areas of the foundation program. The Centre's support system has potential to

expand its services to help students become more responsible and productive citizens. Efforts are also needed to bring out the potential for the benefit of the students and the nation.

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