



Chapter 6 The Importance of General Education

The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.

Alvin Toffler (1928-)

In the modern world, the importance of highly specialized scientific and technical education is well recognized. But a broad education is also important, and this chapter makes the case for liberal or general education (the terms are used interchangeably) at the university level in developing countries. This argument may seem unusual and perhaps also controversial, but it reflects the Task Force's view that this type of education could play a more constructive role than is commonly realized in helping developing countries to achieve their long-term socio-economic goals.

A higher education system should meet many different goals. These include:

- satisfying demand from students for an increasingly sophisticated and rewarding education;
- training the people needed to run a modern society and contribute to its further advancement;
- providing a forum in which a society can examine its problems and identify appropriate solutions; and
- offering a setting in which a society's culture and values can be studied and developed.

In a stratified higher education system, institutions of different types fill these needs in different ways. Professional and vocational

schools meet some needs, while open universities and distance-learning institutions satisfy others. However, developing countries need to be sure that some of their institutions are providing a sufficient breadth of education to give students the abilities that are needed in a rapidly changing world. A general education is an excellent form of preparation for the flexible, knowledge-based careers that increasingly dominate the upper tiers of the modern labor force. With knowledge growing at unprecedented rates, higher education systems must equip students with the ability to manage and assimilate greatly expanded quantities of information. A specific expertise in technology will almost inevitably become obsolete. The ability to learn, however, will continue to provide valuable insurance against the vagaries of a rapidly changing economic environment.

What is a General or Liberal Education?

A general or liberal education has been defined as "a curriculum [or part of a curriculum] aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities in contrast to a professional, vocational or technical curriculum." It is characterized by its focus on "the whole development of an

individual, apart from his occupational training. It includes the civilizing of his life purposes, the refining of his emotional reactions, and the maturing of his understanding of the nature of things according to the best knowledge of our time.”¹¹ These words were written over 50 years ago (today one would use more gender-neutral language).

There are a variety of opinions regarding the characteristics of a liberally educated person. A recent formulation by a member of our Task Force describes such a person as someone who:

- can think and write clearly, effectively, and critically, and who can communicate with precision, cogency, and force;
- has a critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves;
- has a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times, and is able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it;
- has some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems; and
- has achieved depth in some field of knowledge.

This definition focuses on cognitive skills. It concerns teaching people to think and to learn. It also stresses breadth of knowledge across a number of disciplines. A liberally educated person should have an informed acquaintance with the mathematical and experimental methods of the physical and biological sciences; with the main forms of analysis and

the historical and quantitative techniques needed to investigate the development of a modern society; with some of the important scholarly, literary, and artistic achievements of the past; and with humanity’s major religious and philosophical concepts. A liberal education should leave students excited by the world of learning and prepared to continue their education, both in the short term—through in-depth study of a specialist discipline—and in the long term as they continually refresh their knowledge in formal and informal ways, through the process of lifelong learning.

In some parts of the world, the term “liberal education” has a conservative or traditional connotation, implying a particular way of looking at the world. The Task Force, however, is not advocating the universal application of a particular curriculum or teaching method across different cultures. Instead, it is recommending that each country design its own general curriculum to fit the structure and values of its higher education system. Indeed, the exercise of developing a national—though not nationalistic—general education curriculum should be socially useful, requiring a country to examine the state and direction of human knowledge and establish priorities for its higher education system.

As they design and impart a sound, comprehensive educational foundation, educators need to:

- take into account their own economic, social, political, and institutional environment;
- look for the common unifying themes that pull together a curriculum and make it more than an arbitrary combination of alternative elements;
- move beyond limits of traditional disciplinary boundaries to explore the relationships among different subjects and ways of thinking about the world;

¹¹ José Ortega y Gasset, *Mission of the University*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1946, p.1. The quotes are the introductory words of Leo Nostrand, the translator.

Box 9

Home-Grown and Breaking New Ground: Another BRAC Initiative

The Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, or BRAC, is justly celebrated as one of the developing world's most impressive nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Describing itself as a "national private development organization," BRAC has approximately 17,000 regular staff and more than 30,000 part-time teachers covering 50,000 villages. The vast majority of its clients are women, and for the past 27 years it has been making loans to the rural poor and other marginalized populations, as well as offering services including education, training, healthcare, and family planning. The BRAC health program alone covers some 25 million people, while 1.2 million poor children now receive primary education through its education program. About 85,000 groups of the landless poor, with a membership of over 3 million, have also been organized. BRAC's annual budget, 60 percent of which is self-generated, is now more than US\$130 million. Among its latest initiatives is an attempt to set up an entirely new liberal arts university, based on an identification of local needs and aspirations.

BRAC started with a significant program of research among potential employers, students, and parents, as well as successful local universities. BRAC wanted to identify an approach for the proposed university that would ensure not only financial viability through good initial enrollment rates, but that would also ensure that the university's graduate stream would prove attractive to prospective local employers; this, in turn, would link back to maintaining enrollment on an ongoing basis. This initiative took place in the context of BRAC's wider developmental aims for Bangladesh. These include a particular focus on improving the situation and influence of women, from the household level to the labor market.

BRAC's research phase threw up several interesting insights. For example, employers initially told

BRAC that they sought programs with a strong technical focus, for example in biology, technology, management, and computer science. They wanted graduates who were "ready to go." However, on further probing, it emerged that local employers' interests were in fact centered on obtaining a stream of graduates who could demonstrate a strong array of analytical skills and a solid grounding in writing, communication, and presentation skills, in addition to their technical expertise. Their concern—in common with many, if not most, modern employers who are considering graduates as employees—was to seek out workers with a good ability to analyze and think through complexity, a useful level of English language skills, and a well-rounded ability to think independently and take initiative. This is the very combination of general and specialist skills argued for throughout this report.

A study of the competition—successful local private universities—showed two very popular programs: computer science and business administration (a subject that has come to be perceived as a "gilt-edged degree" by students and employers alike). Because of the strong cultural influence they still exert, parents of prospective students were also interviewed about their concerns. Their biggest concern—as with all parents—was quality. They wished to be reassured that the quality of the university education offered was internationally competitive. Like the prospective employers, parents were also emphatic about the importance of English language skills. Some even stated that they would not send their children to a private university where courses were taught in Bengali. Further, parents wished to see their daughters take up higher education (and most of BRAC's membership base is female), but were concerned that current educational possibili-

continued...

Box 9 continued

ties meant their daughters might have to look abroad for good study options. This emphasizes one of the potential roles that educational reform can play in promoting gender equity.

Although BRAC wished to broaden student enrollment among its membership base, there was also recognition that for many of these poorer Bangladeshis, there were issues around both expense and low educational attainment levels. The proposed fees, of between US\$1,500 to US\$2,000 per annum, are in keeping with the upper limit on tuition levels observed at other private universities in Bangladesh, such as North–South University and Independent University. In other words, the tuition fees would be much more than those charged by the public university system (which are entirely nominal at around 50 cents per year; apparently the cost of collecting this fee exceeds the amount collected), but not more than other private universities supplying a more traditional education with early specialization.

A real issue remains with respect to how many can satisfy the test and entry requirements. BRAC University therefore intends to take the practical approach and enroll some, but not all, poor students (with partial-to-full scholarships reserved for a modest percentage of the student population in the four-year program). There is also a plan to create an endowment to help fund these scholarships—the rest will involve cross-subsidies from tuition receipts—while the bulk of students will come from lower-middle-, middle-, and upper-middle-class families.

Through an exhaustive process of research among the main stakeholders, BRAC's feasibility study for a university has developed into what is, in effect, an interesting new hybrid appropriate to developing world contexts. BRAC intends to place an emphasis

on practical and job-related skills while also honing more generally portable analytical and English language skills. The proposed curriculum includes two years of liberal arts, which will also cover general skills, including writing, communication, presentation, and analysis. The core curriculum has courses in development economics, history, sociology, and the sciences (physics or biology) in addition to mathematics and English. Many of these courses would have a strong “development studies” orientation—another way in which the curriculum is customized to national needs.

These two years of liberal arts are then followed by two years of specialized technical training (as distinct from, for example, the more common pattern of four years' general education with a major and electives, as seen in the United States). In this combination there lies a fusion between old and new that more closely reflects students' and employers' aspirations for both a better general education and an ability to take up jobs requiring technical skills.

While surveys indicated a strong demand for a BRAC University on the part of students, the biggest obstacle to be overcome is finding good faculty, especially given that the plan requires adoption of a more modern and active approach to teaching than the traditional “lecture-from-notes” method, where students are asked to simply memorize and then regurgitate facts. It is regrettable that, while the application to become a private university was lodged with the Ministry of Education early in 1997, confirmation has yet to be achieved. This is in part due to an ongoing realignment of higher education priorities in the country.

BRAC website: <http://www.brac.net>

- concentrate on the delivery, not simply the content, of the curriculum, moving beyond rote learning to give students a deeper, more engaged and meaningful exposure to the rich and varied world of intellectual pursuits.

Who Should Receive a Liberal Education?

Depending on the student and his or her goals, different levels of general education are possible. These include:

- a basic grounding for all higher education students, whatever type of institution they attend or course they study;
- a discrete and substantial component of general education, which helps broaden the experience of students engaged in specialist, professional, or technical study; and
- an intensive general education curriculum that provides exceptionally promising, intellectually oriented students with a solid basis for their careers or for advanced specialist study.

Within a differentiated higher education system, the more intensive programs will almost certainly be offered at the most selective universities, with the majority of professional, scientific, and technical courses remaining more narrowly focused. Selective universities prepare many of those who aspire to leadership roles, and for them a preparation for only the initial stages of a career is no longer sufficient. Path-finding individuals must update and acquire new, and often very different, skills. General education is ideally suited to this process of lifelong learning, providing the cognitive orientation and skills needed to facilitate continual re-education.

However, general education should not be confined to a few traditional universities. The capacity for lifelong learning is increasingly

important for the many people who face major career shifts. Mature students, for instance, often return to education with a determination to change the direction of their lives. Many look for study opportunities outside the traditional university system, for example, through distance learning. As noted earlier, women also commonly leave the labor force because of family obligations. Flexibility and the ability to learn new skills have a significant impact on how successfully they return, often after a decade or more.

Increasing the supply of general education can also help to promote social equity and mobility. In some countries, such as parts of Africa, India, and Pakistan, a narrow and privileged segment of the population has already received its broad education at elite secondary institutions that offer elaborate and extensive general education programs. As higher education systems expand, they must become more tolerant at points of entry, while ensuring that quality at the point of exit is maintained. This means shouldering an increased share of the burden of providing general education, and ensuring that those who have not had a broad secondary education have the chance to catch up and fulfil their potential.

Why Is General Education Relevant for Developing Countries?

Does general education deserve support in the developing world, or is it just a luxury for the wealthy countries? The Task Force is convinced that general education has a clear, practical impact on society, well beyond the love of learning and human development it promotes.

Both industrial and developing countries need leaders, educated citizens, and trained workers for industry, government and politics,

and academia. A liberal education enhances the chances that individuals will be able to fulfil these roles with distinction. At present, many developing countries are overly dependent on the industrial countries to offer a broadly based education to a few of their (richer) citizens. Women are especially disadvantaged by this state of affairs, with many families, especially those in conservative societies, frowning upon young women traveling abroad to study.

General education also has a clear practical impact on a society. It can promote responsible citizenship, ethical behavior, educational ambition, professional development in a broad range of fields, and even global integration. It prevents students from becoming “balkanized” in narrowly focused disciplines and fosters cohesion across cohorts whose more talented and motivated students are familiarized with a core body of knowledge, some of which is unique to their own culture and some of which is universal. General education also promotes civil society through its contribution to broad-mindedness, critical thinking, and communication skills, all of which are essential elements of effective participatory democracy. It should foster tolerance and ethical values, helping to encourage the social awareness and philanthropy that are vital to a society’s health and stability.

General education is also important in the development process. It helps society look at the social and ethical questions raised by new development policies and projects, ensuring that a country’s long-term interests are given priority over short-term gains. Within the education sector, it encourages countries to define national intellectual priorities and promote an intellectual identity through the process of defining the content of a general curriculum that meets nationally specific needs.

Finally, better general education may help reduce the brain drain. Providing in-country general education is less expensive

than sending undergraduates abroad. For example, there are roughly 350,000 developing-country graduate and undergraduate students in the United States alone, at a total cost of approximately US\$10 billion per year, which exceeds the individual gross national product of more than half the world’s countries. Students who are educated at home are more likely to remain at home, perhaps even for graduate study. Even in cases where students go abroad for graduate study—and that is the largest group—they are more likely to want to return to a society that has offered them an intellectually stimulating environment during their undergraduate career.

What Are the Obstacles?

In the developing world, the concept of liberal education is associated with a variety of obstacles. While some are economic, the philosophical ones may be more significant.

The first obstacle is the issue of costs and benefits. High-quality liberal education is not inexpensive. It requires more varied faculty resources, interactive rather than passive teaching techniques, seminars in place of lectures, and perhaps a longer period spent in school. But the payoff to a high-quality liberal education is not immediate, and it has a large nonpecuniary component that is difficult to measure.

Funding is clearly problematic, but the more extensive general education programs are not meant for all, or even the majority, of students. They should be aimed at the brightest and most highly motivated in any cohort, with a broader cross-section of students offered less intensive forms of general education. The Task Force attaches great importance to this, as it is far less expensive and time-consuming than offering such an education to all.

Aiming higher education programs at the brightest and most motivated students should not be objectionable or characterized as elitism in the old sense. First, advantage should accrue to an individual because of intellectual capacities and efforts, and not because of social class or wealth. Second, the Task Force advocates special programs for disadvantaged groups at all stages of education, so that these citizens are increasingly able to take advantage of the best educational opportunities. Third, we recognize the value of some general education in nearly all forms of higher education, with specific programs designed and modified for different types of student and school.

These considerations will not eliminate financial concerns, but they should lessen the problem. However, the problem of different abilities remains. Not all individuals are qualified for the same training or the same tasks, given that some tasks are more difficult than others. This implies that inequalities in some areas are a natural outcome. Educating the most able for positions of leadership in all spheres of life has to be in the national interest; it is a major aspect of stratification.

We have already noted that, while the connection between the short-term needs of the labor market and general education may be weak, in the longer run general education is an excellent investment for both individuals and nations. Some believe that general education is at odds with the trend toward increasing specialization within the labor force, especially the upper tiers. On the contrary, high-quality general education strengthens disciplinary specialization by providing a solid foundation for advanced learning and specialization. It also provides a common intellectual currency for interaction among individuals with diverse specializations.

Because general education involves in-depth and open examination of ideas and assumptions of all kinds, it sometimes appears threatening to those who have an interest in

preserving the status quo. That desire, however, represents the very opposite of development. Highlighting the value of liberal education for effective leadership may also pose an implicit challenge to the credentials of leaders who themselves received different training, and sometimes very little formal education. Of course, a more educated leadership is one indicator of socioeconomic progress.

Some will ask why market forces have not created a greater supply of general education if it offers so many benefits. The reasons relate to a disparity between the long-term public interest and short-term needs (see Chapter 2). General education is not part of the academic tradition in most developing countries. In addition, students are interested in immediate, and perhaps more certain, returns, especially when education loans and scholarships are difficult to obtain. High-quality general education tends to be expensive, deterring its provision in both public and private institutions. However, especially in the long run, societies will do well to serve the public interest even if market forces do not create the necessary incentives. General education is, in this sense, in the same category as basic research or equitable access.

Conclusions

In some countries, the term “liberal education” recalls colonial domination and education. This is unfortunate. While this particular method of education has Western roots, our emphasis is on an educational approach developed by each country, paying specific attention to its own culture and its particular needs. The goal for all countries is similar—a broad, flexible, interactive education that addresses the whole human being—but the road to achieving this goal is unique and cannot simply be transplanted from one country to another. The time has come for nat-

ional debates to begin. What is an educated person? Once a country has accepted the general education concept, what are the implications for curricula and other aspects of training?

This debate is under way in a number of developing countries. Some institutions in India, the Republic of Korea, Nigeria, Pakistan, the Philippines, parts of Latin America, and some others already practice general education, although the quality of these efforts is uneven. Most recently, the National University of Singapore has engaged a major curricu-

lar review with the intention of creating a new core curriculum (see Box 10). Leaders from both government and education concluded that national preparation for the knowledge-based world required soundly designed liberal education, as opposed to exclusive emphasis on specialist, and usually technical, subjects. The Task Force hopes this interest in general education will continue to spread across the developing world, and that many more countries will develop increasingly broad, flexible, and innovative curricula.

Box 10

Singapore's Curriculum Renewal for National Goals

In the summer of 1999 the National University of Singapore (NUS) launched its new curriculum for selected undergraduates. This was the result of lengthy consultations that began in 1997, and brought in the views of leading scholars drawn from several elite universities around the world.

Singapore sought to ensure that its future graduates could walk proudly alongside any graduate from the more established schools. They strove to develop the personal, intellectual, and leadership qualities of students to equip them to excel in life.

Key to the new curriculum is exposing students to various schools of thought, helping them to understand, for example, how a physicist, a biologist, and a historian approach problems. Students select their core area of study, but are also obliged to select courses from an area outside their field.

The curriculum attempts to:

- synthesize and integrate knowledge from diverse disciplines, to establish a connection between all human knowledge, and

- infuse students with a concrete understanding of the process of human creativity.

It includes these subjects:

- One module each from the Writing Program and History
- Select modules from the Humanities and Social Sciences and from areas of Science and Mathematics.

The new curriculum has already drawn praise from the private sector. "The Core Curriculum program at NUS is designed to deliver well rounded graduates, who are lateral thinkers, innovative, articulate and groomed to lead," said S. Nasim, Managing Director, Meinhardt (Singapore) Pte Ltd., "comparable to the best graduates of Harvard or MIT. They will be snapped up like hotcakes by industry."

The Core Curriculum, National University of Singapore, 1999–2000