

Analysis of General Education Practice Models in Mainland China's Universities: A Case Study of Peking University

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Abstract

Since the dawn of the 21st century, the concept of general education (GE) has been embraced by numerous universities in Mainland China, initiating an era of exploration into GE theories and practices. Among these institutions, Peking University (PKU) stands out as a pioneering and exemplary figure in the pursuit of GE practice models. This study employs PKU as a case study to dissect its recently published educational policies and instructional documents. Our analysis unfolds across two dimensions: the development trajectory and distinctive features of Yuanpei College, and the establishment and operation of GE courses available to all undergraduates at PKU. Over the past two decades, from implementing the Yuanpei Program to the establishment of Yuanpei College, PKU has transformed the previously narrow and unidirectional educational model into a comprehensive, interdisciplinary one that provides students with ample opportunities for broad thinking. This transformation has been facilitated through the development of a high-level GE course system, the adoption of a free course selection regime, an independent major selection system, and a mentoring system. Furthermore, PKU has launched a GE curriculum across four categories for all undergraduate students, featuring classic readings and small-class discussions. This pedagogical approach aims to expand students' cross-cultural global perspectives, enhance their aesthetic appreciation, and cultivate their capabilities in critical thinking, language expression, communication, practical innovation, and quantitative analysis.

Keywords

General Education, Yuanpei College, General Education Courses.

1. Introduction

The concept of general education, deeply rooted in the Ancient Greek tradition of "liberal education," has been a foundational pillar of educational philosophy since Aristotle first championed the broad development of the individual. This holistic approach to education, emphasizing the cultivation of well-rounded, open-minded individuals, found resonance among influential modern British educators and thinkers, including Arnold, Newman, Huxley, and the American educator Hutchins. While Europe provided the theoretical origins of general education, its practical application and evolution into a formal component of the modern university system were distinctly American achievements. The seminal introduction of general education to the university curriculum by Professor Packard of Bowdoin College in 1829 marked a pivotal moment, integrating comprehensive knowledge across various disciplines to foster a deeper, overarching understanding before specialization (Hirst, 1993).

General education embodies an educational philosophy that transcends professional, vocational, and utilitarian confines, advocating for a universal, foundational, profound, and comprehensive exploration of knowledge. It aims to inculcate fundamental cultural knowledge common to all humanity, serving as a counterbalance to specialized education and striving for holistic development through its curriculum. The advent of modern universities in China,

influenced by Western educational models, brought with it the principles of general education. With the dawn of the 21st century, prominent research universities in Mainland China have progressively embraced and advocated for general education, pioneering its incorporation into their curricula. These institutions aim to nurture innovative talents for the new century, characterized by broad knowledge bases that span arts and sciences, independent thinking, creativity, deep humanistic literacy, robust personalities, and diverse skills. Thus, the practice of general education in Mainland China's universities has embarked on a novel phase of exploration and implementation, marking a significant evolution in the educational landscape.

2. Literature Review

Since 1978, research literature in Mainland China regarding general education has primarily focused on several aspects: the concept and essence of general education, historical reviews of general education, issues within general education practices, and comparative studies of general education between different countries and regions. Some scholars, in light of China's specific conditions, have reflected on the significance, objectives, roles, and nature of general education. They argue for the abandonment of the overly specialized model of higher education in favor of a shift towards an education philosophy that emphasizes "human-centered" education. This shift entails the establishment of a diversified higher education management system, transitioning from "high uniformity" to diversity, aligning with the trends of the new era (Wang, 2006). General education occupies a unique role within the entirety of undergraduate education. It should not be regarded as an add-on to university education but as an integral part that reflects the essence of university education (Jin, 2021). The educational theories of Confucianism, Daoism, and Legalism in China all contain elements of general education, which received comprehensive practice in the lectures of academies after the Song Dynasty (Yin, 2007). The period of the Republic of China (1912-1948) was a significant phase in the development of university general education in China, characterized by the formation of distinctive general education practice models such as the preparatory model, major-minor system, and common compulsory subjects model (Wang & Liang, 2018). Entering the 21st century, reforms in China's university general education at the curriculum and organizational levels have been notably influenced by Western models, particularly those of the United States and the United Kingdom, while the role of local traditions has also been significant, leading to the institutionalization and structuring of general education practices (Shen, 2018). Furthermore, some literature has investigated the proportion of general education courses within the total credits, category structure, and system of practice in Chinese universities, discussing issues in the construction of general education courses from various aspects like course concept, design, policy and system support, teaching objectives, coverage areas, composition ratios, course content, teaching management, and the development of informal courses (Zhang & Xu, 2005). A considerable number of studies have also conducted comparative analyses of general education practices at well-known universities in the United States, Japan, Europe, Mainland China, and the regions of Hong Kong and Taiwan, summarizing the objectives, content, and implementation methods of general education courses and offering suggestions for improving general education courses in Mainland China's universities (Tan, Wang, & Tao, 2020; Cui, 2020).

Research on general education in Mainland China has developed rapidly, especially since the early 21st century, with a significant increase in the volume of literature. However, existing research has several shortcomings. Many documents interpret Western, especially American, concepts and practices of general education excessively, lacking in-depth studies on establishing a concept of general education suitable for China's national conditions. Given the differences in national circumstances and the historical context of their emergence and

development, the concept of general education in the West, even though philosophically congruent with China's, may not be fully suitable in terms of educational content and practice models for China. Additionally, the organizational structures and curriculum systems of universities differ between countries and regions, leading to different interpretations of general education courses, making it difficult to directly compare, for example, the core general education courses with significant credit weight at Harvard University with the less credited elective general education courses in Chinese universities.

3. Research Framework

Peking University, established in 1898, is among the oldest and most prestigious universities in Mainland China. For a long time, Peking University has adhered to the philosophy of integrating specialized education with general education, embedding the concept of general education throughout the entire student cultivation process, aiming for the goals of understanding oneself, understanding society, understanding China, and understanding the world. Hence, Peking University is seen as both a forerunner and an exemplary model in the exploration of general education practices among higher education institutions in Mainland China. Therefore, examining the general education practices at Peking University can significantly reflect the developmental trends and distinct features of general education across Mainland China's universities. This paper will analyze Peking University's most recently released educational policies and instructional documents. These include the 2023 versions of Peking University's Undergraduate Training Programs for Sciences and Humanities, A Brief on Peking University's Core General Education Courses, Peking University's General Education Course Management Measures (Trial), Peking University's Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of General Education Courses, and the Peking University Undergraduate Course Selection Manual for the Spring Semester of 2024 (See Table 1). In the field of education in Mainland China, the implementation of talent training and the evaluation of educational and teaching quality are based on talent training programs. These programs are normative documents that schools use to implement the state's overall requirements for talent training, organize teaching activities, and arrange teaching tasks. The training objectives, requirements, course settings, and credit requirements for each discipline and specialty of every university must be based on these training programs. Thus, these programs are the most important guiding documents for education and teaching in Mainland China's universities. This paper will particularly focus on the latest training program of Yuanpei College at Peking University, exploring the distinctive features of the college's educational approach. By analyzing the latest policy documents related to general education courses formulated and released by Peking University, this study discusses the current state of general education implementation for all undergraduates at Peking University. The research centers around the following questions:

- 1) How does Peking University implement its general education practices?
- 2) What are the distinctive features of Yuanpei College?
- 3) What is the general education curriculum system at Peking University?
- 4) What achievements have been made in the reforms of general education practices at Peking University?

Table 1. Main Policy Documents on General Education at Peking University

Policy Document	Release Date
A Brief on Peking University's Core General Education Courses	May 2022
Peking University's General Education Course Management Measures (Trial)	May 2022
Peking University's Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of General Education Courses	May 2022
2023 versions of Peking University's Undergraduate Training Programs for Sciences and Humanities	June 2023
Peking University Undergraduate Course Selection Manual for the Spring Semester of 2024	January 2024

4. The Practice Model of General Education at Peking University

The rapid development of the socio-economy has become a significant characteristic of the 21st century, primarily manifested in frequent changes in job positions and careers, as well as research innovation characterized by the intersection and integration of disciplines. Against this backdrop, broadening students' horizons, strengthening their foundational knowledge in various subjects, and cultivating their basic skills have become fundamental requirements of higher education. As a research university with an excellent tradition of interdisciplinary integration and the comprehensive advantage of multiple disciplines, Peking University has always been at the forefront of reforming the undergraduate training system and innovating the model of general education within the higher education sector in China. The following will explore the practice model of general education at Peking University from two aspects: the development history and educational features of Yuanpei College, and the construction and provision of general education courses to all undergraduates at Peking University.

4.1. From the Yuanpei Program to Yuanpei College

In the late 1980s, Peking University proposed an educational reform policy emphasizing strengthening foundational studies, de-emphasizing specialization, teaching students according to their aptitude, and diversified cultivation. To achieve this goal, Peking University initiated the Yuanpei Program in 2001, reflecting Mr. Cai Yuanpei's spirit of freedom of thought and inclusiveness, aiming to cultivate first-class undergraduates with solid foundations, strong capabilities, and high quality. In September 2001, Peking University established the Yuanpei Program Management Committee and simultaneously set up the Yuanpei Experimental Class to explore and practice talent cultivation models on a small scale based on the educational philosophy of Yuanpei. The most distinctive features of the Yuanpei Program are as follows: Firstly, admission does not differentiate by major; instead, students are categorized into arts or sciences upon entry without specific majors. The lower grades primarily engage in general education, focusing on elective courses in general education and broad-scope foundational courses. Secondly, the program allows for the autonomous selection of courses and majors, enabling students to freely choose their courses under the guidance of the teaching plan and mentors. After gaining an understanding of their own interests and strengths, as well as the disciplinary status, professional settings, and training objectives at Peking University, students can finally determine their majors at the end of the third semester, based on their abilities and interests. Therefore, to address the rapidly evolving and increasingly diverse social demands and new situations, the goal of the Yuanpei Program is to explore a path of talent cultivation suitable for the situation of Peking University, the national condition, modernization, the world, and the future. The Yuanpei Program is not elite education but an exploration of a new undergraduate training model.

After six years of practice, based on the foundation of the Yuanpei Experimental Class, Yuanpei College officially was established in September 2007 as Peking University's first non-professional undergraduate college, marking a new stage in the reform of undergraduate education at Peking University. Currently, Yuanpei College has set up five interdisciplinary majors and, in September 2018, collaborated with departments across the university to offer a richer array of freshman seminars and a more diverse set of core general education courses, further improving the college's general education system. As an independently established faculty, Yuanpei College serves as a pilot and prototype of the undergraduate colleges at Peking University, with fundamental functions and tasks distinct from those of existing professional colleges. On one hand, Yuanpei College continues to shoulder the responsibility of exploring undergraduate education and teaching reforms at Peking University, acting as a vanguard under the guidance of the Yuanpei Program Management Committee, accumulating experience and providing suggestions for educational reforms across the university. On the other hand, Yuanpei College has the capability to organize interdisciplinary majors and establish a curriculum system across disciplines. With its cross-departmental free course selection mechanism, the college undertakes explorations in flexible, diversified, and personalized teaching plans and major settings, which is significant in providing students with a wider range of choices and educational opportunities, as well as enhancing the diversity of disciplines at Peking University and improving its overall competitive edge.

4.2. Educational Features of Yuanpei College

4.2.1. Establishing a High-level General Education Curriculum System

The construction of a general education curriculum system is a complex systems engineering project. Peking University achieves the optimal allocation of general education course resources through comprehensive management and system orientation. The core courses of general education at Yuanpei College are divided into five major systems: Western Classical Civilization, Chinese Classical Civilization, Modern China, the Modern World, and the Modern Science and Technology Series (Peking University Office of Academic Affairs, 2023). The College places great emphasis on freshman education, integrating the freshman training course system into the overall framework of general education. A 30-hour "Freshman Training Camp" is established, inviting renowned professors from various disciplines to conduct subject-specific lectures, helping freshmen to fully understand the characteristics and frontier issues of each discipline, and assisting students in independently choosing their major directions and courses. In the first semester of freshman year, a mandatory "Freshman Seminar" is set up, inviting professors who have demonstrated excellence in teaching from all departments to teach courses with distinctive themes. Additionally, lectures on various disciplinary directions are organized in the first semester of freshman year to stimulate students' academic interests and guide them in discovering their true passions. Furthermore, freshmen are required to actively engage in at least three discussions with college mentors on topics such as university learning, life planning, and growth during the first semester, aiding them in gaining more life experience and better identifying their direction (Peking University Office of Academic Affairs, 2023).

4.2.2. Implementation of Free Course Selection and Major Self-selection Systems

Yuanpei College has fully implemented a free course selection credit system in undergraduate education, specifically, a credit system based on free course selection under the guidance of the teaching plan and mentors. The total credits required for graduation are generally around 120, with special interdisciplinary majors requiring about 130 credits. Students can apply for degrees upon completing their studies within 3-6 years (Peking University Academic Affairs Office, 2023).

In principle, students at Yuanpei College have the freedom to choose their majors. They can select courses related to their majors in various departments, completing the required courses

for their majors as well as elective courses. Yuanpei College adopts a gradual and phased approach, requiring students to express their intended majors by the end of the second semester and to finalize their majors by the end of the third semester. The organizational advantage of Yuanpei College lies in using the most advanced definitions of majors to cultivate truly potential talents, flexibly adjusting their major directions according to the learning process. The major is merely a mode of organizing courses. Currently, the college has established the following interdisciplinary majors: Paleontology, Political Science, Economics and Philosophy, Foreign Languages and History, Integrated Science, Data Science and Big Data Technology, Artificial Intelligence, offering more choices to students of Yuanpei College.

The broad-based major training model and the free course selection system provide students with ample opportunities to explore knowledge across various disciplines, encouraging them to break free from the confines of their majors, freely navigate through courses offered by different majors at Peking University, expand their horizons, and lay a solid foundation for interdisciplinary research and cross-disciplinary communication in the future.

4.2.3. Mentorship System

The mentorship system is a fundamental institution at Yuanpei College, serving as a crucial safeguard for students to choose majors and courses autonomously and rationally based on their interests and abilities. Currently, Yuanpei College has 60 mentors, including school-appointed mentors, professional mentors, and full-time mentors. School-appointed mentors are senior professors with teaching experience and academic achievements hired from various departments to guide students in course selection, major selection, and study content and methods. Professional mentors are faculty members from relevant departments, teamed up to form a mentoring group for each major; they are responsible for developing teaching plans for their respective directions and guiding students in their research work. Full-time mentors are responsible for guiding students living in residential colleges on issues related to thought, study, life, emotions, and interpersonal relationships in dormitories. These mentors are retired professors, with their offices located within the Yuanpei student dormitories to facilitate communication with students.

The work of mentors is aimed at guiding and cultivating students according to the new educational model and training program, striving to produce first-class undergraduates with strong foundations, capabilities, and quality. Given the multitude of choices and opportunities available, the guidance provided by mentors is crucial for most younger students, who may lack depth of experience and the ability to judge themselves. The methods employed by mentors include office hours, discussions, phone contacts, online consultations, lectures, tea sessions, and spring outings, among others.

4.3. From Elective Courses to General Education Courses

In addition to the explorations in general education practice conducted by Yuanpei College, Peking University has also promoted general education across the entire university. Since September 2000, Peking University has been offering an "Undergraduate Quality Education Elective Course System" throughout the university. These elective courses form a new interdisciplinary foundational teaching system aimed at broadening the base, strengthening quality, cultivating abilities, and emphasizing cross-disciplinary integration. They strive to guide students to acquire a broad range of knowledge from the most fundamental areas of undergraduate education, especially the basic methods and principal approaches of knowledge acquisition in different fields. This system thereby provides students of varied talents, abilities, and experiences with the methods and perspectives necessary for their future long-term learning and development. It is divided into six major fields: "Mathematics and Natural Sciences," "Social Sciences," "Philosophy and Psychology," "History," "Linguistics, Literature, Arts, and Aesthetics," and "Sustainable Development of Society."

At the beginning of the 21st century, to further improve the quality of elective courses in quality education, experts and scholars in relevant fields reflected on and discussed general education in domestic universities represented by the construction of elective courses. They proposed the idea of building "core courses in general education" characterized by "classical readings and small-class discussions" (Feng, Cao & Qiu, 2016). By the spring semester of 2024, Peking University had offered more than 300 "General Education Courses," including more than 100 "Core Courses in General Education" (Peking University Academic Affairs Office, 2024), transforming the previous six categories of elective courses into four series: (1) Human Civilization and Its Traditions; (2) Modern Society and Its Issues; (3) Arts and Humanities; (4) Mathematics, Nature, and Technology. By encouraging teaching methods of "classical reading, critical reflection" and "large-class teaching, small-class discussions," students are nurtured to read classic texts, think deeply about issues, and gain a thorough understanding of the ways of thinking and knowledge inheritance systems in a particular discipline through the courses. The total credits required for elective general education courses are 12 credits, with at least one core course in general education and a minimum of 2 credits in each of the four series (Peking University Academic Affairs Office, 2022).

The general education courses cover a wide variety of disciplines, with the primary teaching goal of cultivating students' ability to analyze problems from the perspectives of different disciplines, rather than simply popularizing knowledge. Thus, each course holds unique value. The purpose of offering general education courses at Peking University is not to require students to achieve the same depth, breadth, and difficulty in these fields as in their major studies but to introduce to students the indispensable ideas, methods, spirits, and values in various disciplinary fields of modern higher education. It aims to showcase the exploratory approaches and research methods of different disciplines and their significance in reality.

4.4. Key Features of General Education Courses at Peking University

4.4.1. Optimizing the Content of General Education Courses

Peking University has implemented significant reforms to the curriculum structure of elective courses, constructing them according to the four series of the current general education courses. Courses on "Human Civilization and Its Traditions" involve deep readings of classical works from both Eastern and Western civilizations to deepen the understanding of cultural traditions, endowing students with a cross-cultural perspective and awareness of the historical roots behind issues. These courses guide students to respect the values and cultural traditions of civilizations worldwide, promoting cultural exchange and inclusivity. Courses on "Modern Society and Its Issues" are problem-oriented, revolving around challenges faced by contemporary society from economic, political, legal, social, and cultural perspectives, thus freeing students from the confines of their own knowledge and cognition and furthering their understanding of modern society's complexity. "Arts and Humanities" courses immerse students in the spirit of humanities, enhance aesthetic appreciation, help students step beyond the utilitarian, pragmatic views of modern society, and return to a human-centered spirit, cultivating their cultural literacy and taste, encouraging the pursuit of truth, goodness, and beauty. "Mathematics, Nature, and Technology" courses primarily assist students, especially those from non-natural science disciplines, in deeply understanding the world in the context of rapid scientific and technological advancements, thereby changing their ways of thinking and fostering new perspectives on the world while also focusing on human development and health, understanding individuals, and comprehending life. General education courses are designed for specific mental training and the cultivation of skills such as language expression, communication, practical innovation, and quantitative analysis (Peking University Academic Affairs Office, 2022).

4.4.2. Reforming Teaching Methods and Styles in General Education Courses

To ensure the quality of teaching in general education courses, the university encourages reform in teaching methods and styles, diverging from traditional lectures and knowledge infusion. General education courses emphasize classical reading, small-class discussions, coursework writing training, and practical activities. Through classical reading, students develop good reading habits and capabilities, enabling them to arrange their studies, reading, thinking, and life more effectively and overcoming the shortcomings of instrumental reading prevalent in traditional knowledge-centric teaching. Small-class discussions encourage active problem engagement by students, fostering positive student-teacher interactions and moving learning beyond mere knowledge acquisition to further develop their expressive abilities and critical thinking (Feng, Cao & Qiu, 2016). Writing exercises enhance students' comprehensive expressive skills, and through practical and process-oriented learning, they experience the joy of discovery and creation, fostering communication skills and a spirit of collaboration (Peking University Academic Affairs Office, 2022).

4.4.3. Building the Faculty for General Education Courses

Strengthening the capability and level of faculty is key to ensuring the quality of teaching in general education courses. The construction of general education courses at Peking University benefits from the university's multidisciplinary advantages and strong faculty. The university uses various mechanisms to encourage teachers with outstanding academic achievements to actively offer general education courses. Contracts are signed with lead teachers of the core courses in general education, ensuring they offer elective courses at least twice within three years. Teachers are required to provide detailed course syllabi, supplementary materials, and arrangements for student tutoring outside of class. Simultaneously, the university has developed a high-level team of teaching assistants to organize small-class discussions, guiding students to delve deeper into issues. Regular exchange activities are organized for teachers to share their teaching philosophies, methods, and cases (Feng, Cao & Qiu, 2016).

The construction of general education courses at Peking University is a complex and progressive systemic project. By fully leveraging its comprehensive range of disciplines, integrated layout, and strong foundational subjects through scientific, standardized, and institutionalized construction and management, the university achieves optimal allocation of resources for elective courses. Through a strict selection and evaluation system, general education courses are planned and integrated to highlight their quality, embodying the university's emphasis on both general and professional education. This approach has opened up vast opportunities for university students to autonomously select courses, gain broad knowledge, strengthen their foundations, and enhance their quality.

5. The Effects and Limitations of General Education Reform Practices at Peking University

Through changes in concepts, systems, mechanisms, and methods, Yuanpei College strives to embody the philosophy of general education in its curriculum and course content reforms, focusing on strengthening foundational knowledge, de-emphasizing specialization, teaching according to students' aptitude, and cultivating individuality. This approach has transformed the previously narrow, unidirectional transmission model of education into a broad, multidisciplinary, and interdisciplinary one that leaves ample space for students' intellectual development. Yuanpei students have demonstrated excellent capabilities within Peking University's rich and complex curriculum and major systems, showcasing their uniqueness in firmness of professional thinking, breadth and depth of professional foundations, and learning and independent working abilities, thereby revealing their solid foundations and broad horizons as distinctive advantages. The main challenge faced by Yuanpei College is the difficulty

of integrating general education with professional education and the phenomenon of segmented treatment. Some students spend a lot of time on general education courses in their lower years and feel overwhelmed when entering specialized studies, and by their senior years, they often revert to the traditional model of specialized education, making it difficult to continue general education throughout their university career.

Peking University has now established a comprehensive and rich general education course system for all undergraduates, leading the nation in scale and richness of general education. After changing from six categories of elective courses to four categories of general education courses, the classification of general education courses has become clearer, touching more on the core of general education, more grand, and more related to essential issues, thus improving students' course selection experience. The teaching method characterized by "classical reading and small-class discussions" makes students the main participants in discussions and thinking, stimulating their interest in classics while training their logical thinking and expressive abilities. The relaxed and orderly atmosphere of general education classes overturns the traditional "cramming" teaching method and promotes equal interaction between teachers and students. The university needs to further consider how to adjust the relationship between general education and professional education to integrate them organically, ensuring that general education continues seamlessly over four years. Another issue is that one of the goals of general education courses is to cultivate students' thinking and shape their personalities, whose effects are often not immediately apparent, difficult to measure, and cannot be judged by traditional exams and grades. Although teachers of general education courses at Peking University have set up various assessment stages and methods using a diversified evaluation system, it still carries strong pragmatic and instrumental features. The university needs to consider how to give teachers more autonomy in assessment methods, increase the proportion of process-oriented assessments, and make evaluation an integral part of the entire course learning process (Wang Jialu, 2022).

6. Conclusion

The practice model of general education at Peking University truly reflects the purpose of university education: it is not about teaching students specific skills needed for their future livelihoods, nor about training excellent practitioners, but about cultivating capable and educated individuals. It focuses on nurturing people who actively participate in social life, possess a sense of social responsibility, and are well-rounded citizens of society and the world. However, general education and interdisciplinary training are not simply about aggregating courses from different disciplines for students to study once through. Effective general education and interdisciplinary training should inspire student autonomy while providing ample space for free exploration, focusing on their interests, and cultivating their long-term interest in academic and cultural development. This approach ensures students have a solid foundation, integrate arts and sciences, and possess a reasonable structure of knowledge and skills, equipped with scientific literacy, humanistic spirit, and refined tastes.

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