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THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING THE GENERAL EDUCATION IN STRENGTHENING THE HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM^{*)}

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Abstract

Lately the system of modern education has produced reliable scientists and technocrats but has not spawned graduates with the integrity of mature personalities. To overcome this, the concept of General Education (GE) can be applied. GE is the implementation of the concept as a reaction to the tendency of modern society in idolizing the products of technology and tend to ignore human values due to the product of modern secular education system .

GE is education aimed in developing the personality of the students in the community and the environment through educational programs that foster and develop all aspects of a student 's personality. Besides that, GE aims to cultivate and create mature understanding in the purpose of life according to the nature of science of all time . With GE, it is expected that students can apply the ethical behaviors and culture when they live in the society .

GE programs must be maintained in the curriculum of higher education (universities), but need to be adjusted in accordance with the times.

Keywords : General Education (GE), humanistic, personality, higher education system, integrity.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The 21st century characterized by the phenomenon of globalization is a challenge for higher education in producing knowledge which has a very important role in society. According to Drucker (1989) as cited by Wibisono (1999: 72) this phenomenon will be realized in the *knowledgeable society* based on information and have the ability to access and process information creatively. Besides that, the *knowledgeable society* are required to carry out the *self-learning* and are able to communicate and work together in experiencing cross-country, culture, language, technology, and other fields. In the system of higher education, the learning process is

expected to generate human beings to have an adequate identity, attitude, knowledge and in accordance with the demands of society. Karyono (2012: 3) called it as a “*manusia purnawan*” (human being) that logically is not robotic but who has the ability to separate and not adaptive to the social and cultural changes.

Correspondingly Bunoti (2012: 1) also stated that higher education is recognized as a main strength for modernization and development. The quality of higher education is influenced by socio-cultural, academic, economic, policy, political and administrative factors all of which are *inextricably interwoven*. But lately Imron (2013: 118) observed that the educational paradigm is beginning to shift from humanism education system toward dehumanism education, where there is a fundamental change in the context of social interaction that actually erode social solidarity and integration. The changes appeared when the dimensions of the moral and spiritual started to be forgotten. The main values of humanism begin to be left behind, the needs of social participation and social welfare are increasingly sidelined.

Today, the system of higher education tends to lead to a process of dehumanization. It is characterized by the sharpening of scientific studies or excessive specialization in specific fields. Thus, the education system tends to only understand the man in one particular aspect, while other aspects are ignored. Such education will produce the graduates whose mindset and lifestyle of materialistic and mechanistic behavior. The graduates will be a generation with poor human values and will worry the future generations. They enter into the global competition by any means to achieve the material success alone. Or in other words, the current system of modern education has produced the reliable scientists and technocrats but has not spawned the graduates who have the mature integrity and personality.

In fact, *The Law of Indonesia No. 20 Year 2003 on National Education System* has mandated that the National Education serves to develop skills and to form the characters and civilization of the nation's dignity in order to achieve the life of the nation, aimed in developing the potential of students to become a man of faith, with the fear of God Almighty, noble, healthy, knowledgeable, skilled, creative, independent, and become democratic and accountable citizens.

Therefore, to restore the function of the education, especially at higher education, it is necessary to strengthen the form of education that can produce *humanistic values*, and one of them is through the General Education. General Education (GE) is education aimed at developing the personality of a person in society and its environment, or it can be also referred to as educational programs that foster and develop aspects of a student's personality. Various studies on the success of General Education to form graduates that have *humanistic character* have been done by White (1994), Kosslyn (2007), Hart Research Associates (2009). In Indonesia, the implementation of General Education has been done by the various groups of subjects such as MKDU (Mata Kuliah Dasar Umum) or Course of General Basic) consisting of MPK (Mata Kuliah Pengembangan Kepribadian) or Course of Personality Development and MBB (Mata Kuliah Berkehidupan Bermasyarakat) or Course of Society Living.

This paper aims to socialize the understanding of the importance of General Education in higher education as a form of strengthening educational programs that can provide *humanistic values*.

II . CONCEPT OF GENERAL EDUCATION

Philip Phenix (1964 , 1986) stated that everyone (student) is educated to be able to implement and understand the meaning of the six realms of meaning as a basis in developing his competence, namely : (1) symbolics, namely language and numeracy, (2) empirics, the ability to conduct empirical studies, (3) aesthetics, the ability to understand the beauty of art and natural phenomena, (4) ethics, namely the ability to know what good or bad is, (5) synoetics, namely the ability to think logically and rationally, and (6) the synoptic, namely the ability to religion or philosophy. These six realms of meaning are the content and purpose of the General Education (Townsell, 2008: 1). In accordance with Philip Phenix's opinion, Soedijarto (2004 : 95) argued that every "realms of meaning" containing specificity in the method, an extensive knowledge structure, and basic concepts so that the younger generations need to be ready to continue the development of the concept in order to understand the meaning of the learned for life .

However, today's modern education system only produced reliable scientists and technocrats but did not produce graduates having mature personality and integrity and are still

far from the target of the six realms of meaning. Kosslyn (2007 : 3-8) emphasized that the GE program is a place where students can be brought to understand how to deal with everything that happens in their lives. Thus, the aims of GE programs are :

- (1) Preparing the students to be involved in civic life, it means to participate in public life,
- (2) Teaching students to understand themselves as products of a tradition of art, ideas, and values. They should understand what is at stake in cultural conflict,
- (3) Preparing students to respond critically and constructively changes. Students need to know the strengths that produce the changes and transformation in modern life. Not only in order to make a decision as a civilian agency, but also to have control over their own lives.
- (4) Developing the students' understanding of the ethical dimensions of what they say and do, and be able to understand the ethical consequences in which they act .

After the implementation of GE in several universities in the United States, Cronk (2004) stressed that the concept of GE, in fact, is actually the modern expression of an old idea which is the idea of a well-educated wanting to be a cultured man and to have freedom in accordance with the realities of human existence, both past and present. In general, GE is intended for all people in order to be really educated. The GE opposes the academic education which contains of excessive "individualism and specialization", fragmentation of the learning process through excessive "disciplinism" and the rigid system of education bureaucracy.

IBRD / World Bank (2000 : 83) suggested some of the characteristics of people who already understand the GE/Liberal Education, namely : (1) to be able to think and write clearly, effectively, and critically, and to communicate convincingly, (2) to have a critical appreciation for ways to acquire knowledge and understanding of the universe, society, and themselves, (3) to have a broad knowledge of culture and to be able to make decisions based on wideworld reference, (4) to have an understanding and experience in thinking systematically about morals and ethics, (5) to acquire the depth of knowledge in some fields of knowledge.

In practice, GE has a set of processes that involves the collection, interpretation, and presentation of knowledge . On the other hand, the GE program will be focused on the process of communication, writing, and researching in various fields, while other programs will be focused on the presentation of knowledge (e.g : study program of Natural Sciences, Humanities,

Mathematics, Social Sciences, Health, and others). These will result in the fundamental interaction between process and knowledge. Therefore, with the help of GE programs, students can develop the skills (e.g : critical thinking , writing and communicating effectively, and be able to do research) and to become familiar with the various areas of knowledge that can be used when they are in the community and their environment.

The comprehensive GE programs can afford to create the capability in terms of :

- (1) increasing the student 's personality, cultural understanding, and fostering intellectual level,
- (2) fostering the personal awareness and being able to adapt and to grow in a changing world and to understand the past, present, and future,
- (3) being capable of handling the social issues, ethics, and philosophy,
- (4) developing a culture of appreciating human diversity and cultural heritage,
- (5) improving students' ability to co-exist ethically in the world of culture which is diverse and complex,
- (6) cultivating the intellectual attitude of "curiosity" and be able to think analytically in the context of lifelong learning.

The development of those capabilities may vary over the field of GE science, such as Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Culture, Arts and Humanities, Language, Math, thus allowing the students who can afford to transfer and to apply the knowledge in some aspects of life and to solve the daily life problems.

III. GENERAL EDUCATION AS A STRENGTHENING OF HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AND EXPERIENCES FROM VARIOUS UNIVERSITIES

Along with the rising of the General Education (GE) trend in the United States that began in the late 1970s, Gaff (1989) reported that the higher education in the United States received some attacks from the public with the statement that too many students failed to develop their knowledge extensively, especially in terms of communication, logic and critical thinking, and collaborativeness in solving problems. Therefore, it is necessary to reform the higher education curriculum by incorporating the concept of multiculturalism, ethics, and global studies (White, 1994: 169).

The paradigm of education that focused on pragmatic interests, teaching mind through drills and skills, would need to be balanced with the ideal heart-touching in ethics and aesthetics. Therefore, it must be revitalized that education is a moral and intellectual powers which runs in balance, and should not be lame.

In Indonesia, BNSP (2010: 37) or National Education Standards Agency has warned us that today the true meaning of education as “a lifelong process of self-discovery” is almost forgotten. Mass education is growing out of control, pupils/students are treated as raw material processed by mechanistic way to produce a final product that “could be sold”. The development of education tends to give priority in the field of science, technology, economics, while ethics and aesthetics are paid less in attention, even almost forgotten. Whereas, the ethical aspects concerning of behavior, politeness, civility are very important when considering that education is “the guardian of civilization”. Similarly, from the aesthetic aspect, which is linked with beauty as a product of creative and recreative activities are also paid less in attention. As a result, both the natural environment and the built-in environment which were originally beautiful, harmonious, balanced, however, are now damaged, ugly and dangerous to human life, especially to the next generation .

In this context, the meaningfulness of GE in college always lies in the vision, mission and action. This leads in the development of the whole personality that can internalize and implement the values of : faith and piety, noble, healthy, knowledgeable, skilled, creative, independent, democratic and accountable. These values are very essential, non-technical, prerequisites for the development of the whole personality. These values can be developed through various of meaning, such as symbolics, empirics, ethics, aesthetics, synnoetics, and synoptics as argued by Philip Phenix (1964).

The GE can make a dignified human being becomes a good citizen, the citizen who are able and willing to face, be alive and to support the world that he occupied (Ganeswara, 2009: 1). Therefore, GE's policies in higher education programs must be linked with the aim at fostering and strengthening the *Tri Dharma Perguruan Tinggi* (teaching, research and community service). The planned program in strengthening GE's higher education system can be focused on the following themes (BSNP, 2010 : 35) :

1. Building the understanding/awareness as a nation based on nationalism citizenship (civic nationalism), which is based on a sense of humanity,
2. Building the understanding/awareness of the importance of tolerance in the building life together in order to form a "multicultural citizenship" leading to a creative and responsive community,
3. Designing the teaching and research themes and social activities that encourage the growth of understanding and mutually respect cultural groups, ethnic, religion, race, gender differences, origins, and other identities,
4. Coaching the skills of mediation and negotiation in order to build peace through the conflict resolution efforts and conflict transformation.

In addition to the themes focused above, the GE programs implemented in the form of curriculum need to be revised or modified so that it can adapt with the times. In the process of GE curriculum revision or changes, it should pay attention to three factors that can affect changes, as proposed by Oliver & Hyun (2011: 4), namely : external influences , organizational influences , and internal influences .

External influences like society, government, alumni, and others can influence the development of curriculum and the process of curriculum change. These external influences cause a number of educational institutions to review the curriculum in an effort to identify the learning outcomes system desired. In addition to external influences, higher education institutions must be able to overcome the organizational influences that affect the process of educational change and the level of structural collaboration. For example, structural barriers to change the design of higher education in separating a science into the units of science or sub-science requires the decision of a larger institution scale. Furthermore, the internal influences such as the process of leadership, leadership team, faculty, department, and other internal community can influence the development and change of curriculum .

In addition to the above three effects, Oliver & Hyun (2011: 6) also warned that the changes and curriculum development need to consider the role of culture of the educational institution. The challenge in the concept of culture is that every member of the organization

understands and defines it in different contexts. The impact of culture will change the educational process in the level of institution, department, and faculty.

Many universities have already implemented GE to strengthen their education system. They continuously make improvements, especially in revising the curriculum with a variety of models. Some of these universities are outlined below.

To design the curriculum revision or development of GE, the University of Kentucky (2008) has successfully conducted seven principles as the mode of instruction and evidence-based thinking. The seven principles are:

1. Courses in the GE curriculum will incorporate learning experiences that produce understanding of the process of inquiry and help students develop critical thinking skills.
2. The GE curriculum will consist of no more than the equivalent of thirty credit hours of course work.
3. A revised curriculum will intentionally identify and strengthen the connections between the GE curriculum and the student's major field of study.
4. A revised GE curriculum will be designed to smooth students' transition from high school to a research university, and to establish the foundations for advanced college-level learning.
5. A revised GE curriculum will pay explicit attention to developing students' communication skills and quantitative reasoning abilities.
6. The GE curriculum will lay the foundation for effective citizenship in our pluralistic society that is increasingly interconnected with a multilingual, global community.
7. The curriculum will specify learning outcomes and the processes for both the systematic assessment of those learning outcomes and ongoing curricular improvement.

Since the beginning of the 1980s, The Association Of American Colleges and Universities (AAC & U) has worked intensively to reform GE. This step was taken by the AAC & U to ensure that each student understands the GE curriculum that is relevant and challenging. Fellow members of AAC & U work together to strengthen the GE program as a whole, such as helping students to develop a sense of social responsibility, improving the intellectual and practical skills, improving problem-solving and analytical skills and applying knowledge and skills in the real world (AAC & U, 2012). According to a research conducted by Hart Research

Associates (2009) showed that a large majority of AAC & U members institutions (78 %) has had the general skills that can enable their students to succeed. The skilled activities are focused on writing, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, and verbal/oral communication skills, and the knowledge areas most often incorporated are humanities, social sciences, global culture, and mathematics. Then the vast majority (89 %) of AAC & U member institutions always assess and modify their GE program gradually. Currently AAC & U has put a high priority on curriculum reform GE compared with previous years.

Illinois State University (2012) also has revised its GE programs through the concept of "integrative learning" with emphasis on the use of active learning strategies both within and outside the campus. This can be done by entering the tasks co-curriculum in the GE programs. Meanwhile, Harvard University (2007) has applied the model "activity-based learning" in its GE programs with the aim of helping students to know what and how they learn in the classroom as well as perform and inform outside the classrooms and vice versa.

City University of Hong Kong (2012) through the Department of Education Development and Gateway Education (EDGE) has conducted an international conference on the General Education and University Curriculum Reform. This conference brings together academic leaders, innovative teachers, as well as advocacy for quality improvement of higher education in Asia, North America and Europe to discuss curriculum reform and improve education, particularly undergraduate courses in GE. One of the interesting things in GE applied by China, especially in Hong Kong is their earnestness to learn the culture of foreign countries. It can be seen from the presence of foreign countries studies which are included in the GE curriculum of higher education that can be taken by all students. As well as the involvement of guest lecturers from foreign countries that provide advocacy or advice about teaching and learning process.

One of the lessons learned in the implementation of the GE program at the City University of Hong Kong is a model of "problem-based learning". The perceived benefits by students are : (1) improving the ability in problem solving, (2) motivated in thinking critically, (3) improving communication skills, and (4) improving the ability to work with the team.

While in Indonesia, particularly at the Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia (University of Indonesia Education), according to the research conducted by Ganeswara (2009), the

implementation of the GE programs has not been successful. In terms of the vision and philosophy, approaches, methods of teaching and education, the commitment to achieve the vision, and its relation to the General Education, for example the course of “Citizenship” has not fully succeeded in developing graduates as good citizens and personality intact. The GE curriculum has not been able to develop the programs of study. The GE courses are still regarded as a subject that is inserted (*juxtaposition*) in the curriculum of study program. But in general, UPI has been applying the principles of GE.

IV . CLOSING

Adhering to the principle that GE implemented to strengthen the higher education system, the GE programs must continue to be improved both in the curriculum and teaching and learning methods. Therefore, learning models that emphasize the characteristics and diversity need to be developed in GE programs, such as : PBL (Problem Based Learning), PLP (Personal Learning Plans), PBA (Performance Based Assessment), and so forth. Besides, it should be also stressed that the model of cooperation based learning among individuals is to improve the interpersonal competence and social life, as taught in the concept : Cooperative Learning, Collaborative Learning, Meaningful Learning, and so forth.

In order for the preparation and development of the GE curriculum can provide opportunities for teachers to grow professionally and assist students in achieving educational goals and objectives , it will be better to follow the recommendation of Jacobs and Kritsonis (2006) : (1) the curriculum should have a specific scope, (2) curriculum must have a logical sequence, (3) the curriculum should consider student growth factors, (4) educators should be selective in choosing curriculum materials that can evoke meaning, (5) the curriculum should be coupled with discipline, (6) the curriculum should pay attention to the ideas of each of the courses taught on campus, (7) the curriculum should have a valuation method, (8) the curriculum should take into account the student's enthusiasm for learning, (9) the curriculum should be taught in a friendly environment, (10) the curriculum should be interesting and excite the imagination of student.

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