

# ASSOCIATION FOR GENERAL AND LIBERAL STUDIES

## 2015 AGLS Awards for Improving General Education: Exemplary Program Processes

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**Section #3: Application Summary**

The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) is a comprehensive research university with more than 15,000 undergraduates. To mitigate the shortcomings of the distribution requirement it has adopted since 1986, CUHK has implemented since 2012 a common core component, the 6-unit General Education Foundation (GEF) after 6 years of hard work including research, consultation, course design and piloting, teacher development, and campus buy-in. GEF introduces to students major thoughts and values across disciplines and cultures through the reading of classic texts. The seminar-based class is kept small to facilitate peer discussion and student-teacher interaction. The intensive coursework sets high standard for university learning. Though being compulsory and very challenging, GEF has been commended by students as mind-opening, and beneficial to their academic transition. To supplement findings from surveys and focus-group interviews, direct assessment of student papers as evidence is underway to gauge student achievement and areas of improvement.

**Section #4: Award Criteria**

**Criterion 1: Identifying the Need for New Program Creation or Revision**

Since its inception, The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) has held the strong belief that the mission of a university education is not merely to provide society with disciplinary experts, but also to nurture citizens with leadership grounded in a breadth of knowledge, a wide world view and broad-mindedness. This conviction explains why General Education (GE) has always been an indispensable part of the university's undergraduate curriculum.

Since 1986, GE at CUHK has consisted two parts: College GE, designed and run by the different constituent colleges of CUHK, and University GE, common to all CUHK undergraduate students. Between 2002 and 2003, a major review on GE took place at CUHK. Meetings with students, GE teachers, Faculty Deans, as well as open consultations were held. A general consensus from these meetings was that GE needed to be more structured, with its objectives better spelt out. Resulting from this review, the University GE was restructured in 2004 into four areas according to four aspects of common human intellectual concerns, namely: Chinese Cultural Heritage; Nature, Science and Technology; Society and Culture; and Self and Humanity. Students are required to complete at least one course in each of the four areas. A course review mechanism was also introduced. Every GE course is to be reviewed by a newly established Standing Committee on GE in a three-year cycle.

This distribution requirement, totaling more than 230 courses offered by over 40 departments, widens students' intellectual horizon, and instills in them an understanding of the values of different disciplines. Yet it shares the weakness of all distribution requirements: it does not engender a common learning experience; the courses are each conceived on its own without a view to be connected with the others, and quality varies from one course to another. The vigorous review mechanism can only assure the quality of individual courses. The coherence of the program is not explicit to students. Findings of a survey and of its follow-up focus-group interviews in 2005 revealed that students could hardly perceive the meaning and coherence of the curriculum as a whole. In one interview, students affirmed that it was very difficult to engage in serious discussion of common concerns with their peers without being ridiculed.

Also in 2005, the Hong Kong University Grants Committee announced that all publicly funded universities would switch to a four-year undergraduate curriculum from 2012 onwards. The extra year should provide more opportunities for GE, language enhancement, overseas exchange and active hostel life. A series of consultations was organized in CUHK to engage faculty, administrators, students and alumni in the deliberation of a ten-year strategic planning for the University. In the resulting Strategic Plan 2006, the University articulates its vision for its graduates: CUHK graduates should have “an appreciation of the values of a broad range of intellectual disciplines as well as general knowledge”, “a depth of knowledge within a specialty”, “a habit of reading widely”, “a deep understanding of Chinese culture”, “an appreciation of other cultures”, “a high degree of inter-cultural sensitivity, tolerance and a global perspective”. They should also be “critical and independent...effective in communication and working in a team”. With a key role to play in this vision, the credit units of GE would be increased from 15 to 21 under the four-year curriculum.

The four-area distribution requirement can assure students' exposure to a wide range of disciplines, and "a deep understanding of Chinese culture" can be acquired in the area "Chinese Cultural Heritage". However, the appreciation of other cultures is only covered sporadically by some of the courses in the area "Society and Culture". Furthermore, the habit of reading widely, the ability to be critical and independent, and the effectiveness in communication and teamwork can only be enhanced if they become well-defined learning outcomes with aligned learning activities and assessment in the design of all GE courses.

The additional 6 credit units provided a unique opportunity for the institution to enhance its GE program. After careful studies of available literature, research findings and practices of other institutions, the Office of University General Education proposed to introduce a first-year common core to supplement the existing distribution requirement. It was scrupulously designed and closely structured to enhance students' knowledge about different cultures and critical reasoning ability, and to help them develop good intellectual habits in a more effective way.

The resulting GE Foundation (GEF) Programme uses seminar-based classics-text studies as its format. This 6-unit program comprises two required courses, "In Dialogue with Humanity" and "In Dialogue with Nature", one focusing on the humanities and one on sciences. Through the study of selected classics (in short excerpts), these two courses guide students to deliberate on a set of essential human questions. From a range of traditions including Chinese, Western, Hebrew and Islamic, the texts are excerpted from masterpieces in philosophy, literature, religion, political economy, physical science, life science, and history and philosophy of science. They provide students with a multi-cultural, multi-disciplinary worldview. Learning activities are so designed that students must be active learners – they have to read the text before they come to class to discuss it with their fellow students and teacher; they are required to write reflective journals and a term paper to deepen their understanding and reflection. By placing the GEF courses at the beginning of their undergraduate experience, we aim for GEF to convey a high expectation on freshmen, to set a high standard for their learning, and to cultivate in them good habits of active learning.

GE teachers of the "Four Areas" were briefed and consulted on this new GE component, in the GE summer retreat 2007, and in subsequent GE lunch seminars. They were engaged in discussions of possible contributions of GE to the desired attributes of CUHK graduates defined by the Strategic Plan 2006. Outcomes-based approaches have been introduced for all GE courses since 2008. A series of lunch seminars was organized for teachers to deliberate on the intended learning outcomes for each GE Area, followed by workshops aimed at assisting teachers to adopt outcomes-based approaches. In 2009 a set of learning outcomes for GE program on the whole, comprising College GE and University GE (GEF and the Four Areas) were articulated and adopted. Starting from 2010, the internal reviews focused on the clarification of learning outcomes and their alignment with the corresponding course syllabus, learning activities and course assessment. Interactive pedagogy, formative assessment, and teamwork are recommended, and all courses should provide substantial but realistic amount of reading materials for students to read on their own.

## Criterion 2: Identification of Goals and Procedure Used to Address Needs

To follow up on the major review of 2002-03 resulting in the revamp of University GE in 2004, the Office of University General Education organized two student focus-group interviews complemented by a questionnaire survey, in November 2005 and January 2006, respectively, to investigate students' understanding, expectation and learning experience in GE. The findings revealed that though the students agreed with the ideal and values of GE in principle, they cared more about getting good grades and did not consider GE important for their future life and career. Some of them also complained about the watered-down quality of some of the GE courses. Apparently, students did not perceive any unifying rationale behind the different GE courses, and no common learning experience could be derived from the distribution requirement structure.

In October 2006, the CUHK Senate approved the increase of GE requirements from 15 to 21 units starting 2012, when the undergraduate curriculum would revert to a four-year system. It assigned the Director of General Education to develop the contents of the additional 6 units. The Office took this as a unique opportunity to enhance the University's GE program. The Associate Director, as the only full-time academic member of the Office (the Director being of concurrent employment), was in charge of the design of the new general education component.

Extensive literature review was carried out. Research findings on first year experiences, high-impact practices and student engagements were very useful references for the conception of course design for the new GE courses. Yet, the most decisive reference was the findings of A. W. Astin about the effects of different GE models on learning outcomes. In his *What Matters in College?*, Astin says, "... the true-core interdisciplinary approach to general education, in which all students are required to take precisely the same set of courses ... does appear to have generally favorable effects on ... general education outcomes ..." because "general education outcomes are...enhanced when students devote a lot of time to study, when they socialize with diverse student peers, when they serve as tutors for each other, and when they engage each other in discussion of contemporary issues."

A general framework of a six-unit, year-long compulsory first-year GE Foundation program was proposed and subsequently endorsed by the Senate Committee on General Education in December 2006. A task force comprising eight faculty members from various disciplines (namely, philosophy, history, translation, English literature, physics, information engineering, political science, and sociology) was set up in 2007 to work out the detailed framework and make recommendations on the syllabus design, pedagogy, assessment, academic standards, and quality assurance.

**Common learning and first year experience, student engagement, cultural diversity,** and **connection to life experience** became the guiding concepts for the design of the new GE component, which should help students to:

- **Build a community of learners:** Reading the same set of classic texts and discussing common themes can provide a common learning experience among students, and foster their sensitivity to common concerns of human existence, from which intellectual dialogue can emerge.

- **Become active learners and be successful in their academic transition:** The common learning experience would take place in the first year of university learning. As the courses require students to read difficult texts, to compare and appreciate different cultures and values, and to discuss and write on themes of perennial issues of human existence, they nurture in students the habits of reading on, thinking about, and discussing serious and complex topics. The enhanced reading, writing, and thinking skills gained in the first year will be beneficial to students' subsequent learning in the university and in their lifelong pursuit. The format of the class encourages active learning, self-initiation and participation. The courses thus set a high standard and expectation for general education, and for university learning.
- **Embracing cultural diversity:** The two courses, one focusing on the humanities and the other on sciences, guide students to deliberate on a set of essential human questions about good life, good society, and the achievements and limits of scientific knowledge. The excerpts of selected classics are from a wide range of traditions and disciplines. These courses provide students with a real multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary worldview, and give them a grasp of the thoughts essential in the shaping of human civilizations.
- **Understand the relatedness of learning and life:** The classic texts should be selected to help students reflect on questions important to their lives and yet not necessarily asked in their major disciplines. They serve as vehicles or access points through which students approach these questions. The discussion sessions and written assignments help them see that classics are not unquestionable authorities contained in a book. The questions concerning life, society and knowledge were asked repeatedly in the past and are being asked even today. Students are encouraged to contemplate, criticize and, only where they see fit, adopt the values they have thought through.

Lunch seminars, focus group meetings and briefing sessions were organized at different stages of the development of the program so as to inform GE teachers, CUHK faculty members across the board, students, and alumni of the rationale and design of the GEF, as well as to collect their comments and feedback for the fine-tuning of the program design.

The enhancement of the quality of GE courses in the Four Areas was carried out in parallel. The Office made the most of the Fulbright Hong Kong General Education Project 2008-2012, tapping into the expertise of American scholars with long-standing experience in teaching and managing GE programs. Seminars and workshops were organized to disseminate benchmark practices. GE teachers in CUHK were exposed to international trends of outcomes-based approaches, and trained to design GE course with explicit and articulated outcomes, and course components that align with these outcomes. The Office also started revising the questionnaire of the term-end Course and Teaching Evaluation to incorporate questions evaluating the attainment of learning outcomes at the program, area and course levels.

### **Criterion 3: Actions Taken**

The scale and importance of GEF as a common academic experience for all undergraduate students is unprecedented at CUHK. Early, thoughtful and substantial preparation was undertaken to ensure smooth implementation.

#### **1. Course Pilot and Gradual Launching**

After the approval of the framework of GEF by the Senate Committee on General Education in early 2008, two teachers at Senior Lecturer level with substantial experience in GE teaching were hired as Associate Directors of GEF. They were charged with the task to articulate the detailed learning outcomes, syllabus, learning activities and assessment methods of the two courses. The results were two pilot courses that were implemented in spring 2009 as electives in the Four Areas. In the second year of piloting (2009-10), one more teacher in each course was hired, and more sections of the pilot courses were offered. A total of ten sections were offered during the pilot period. These pilot classes allowed the teachers to test and review the course designs, and to develop appropriate pedagogy.

In 2010-11 a soft-launch was introduced to include all students admitted one year earlier to the University, i.e. local students under an early admission scheme, and secondary school graduates from mainland China. The two courses, renamed as “In Dialogue with Nature” and “In Dialogue with Humanity”, were compulsory to these special groups of students. One more teacher was hired for each team, with the Associate Directors acting as team leaders to develop further the course designs and pedagogy.

When the GEF program was fully launched in 2012, the two courses had already been offered in a larger scale (about 600 students per year) consecutively for 4 semesters. This gradual launching contributed much to the preparation and fine-tuning of the course design, pedagogy and program logistics catering to the needs of a freshmen population of more than 3500.

#### **2. Teacher Development**

In August 2008, before the actual implementation of the pilot courses, the two Associate Directors were sent to Columbia University in the City of New York for three weeks to observe the actual operation of its signature Core Curriculum. They met with instructors and administrators of the Core Curriculum, and audited a great number of Core classes, especially those of the courses “Literature Humanities” and “Contemporary Civilization”, which were most relevant to GEF. The pedagogy, student reception and teacher development practice of these seminar-based core-text courses were closely observed and became reference for the implementation of GEF.

The gradual hiring of teachers mentioned above means that by the time of the full launch, a core team of six teachers had been built to lead and mentor a much bigger team of 21 new teachers. Different strategies were employed to facilitate team building, cultivation of ownership and exposure to best practices in teaching and learning for these new teachers:

- **Mentorship and community of practice:** New teachers formed small discussion groups facilitated by teachers of the original core team. These mutual support groups deliberated regularly on text selection, themes for discussion and appropriate pedagogy.
- **In-house mini-conference:** Since summer 2013, mini-conferences were organized to provide opportunities for teachers to learn from each other and expand their skills and knowledge. The topics are mainly teachers' reflection on the texts and pedagogies.
- **Seminars by external experts and overseas conferences:** External experts in specific texts or pedagogy were frequently invited to conduct seminars and workshops to broaden teachers' horizon and strengthen their confidence in teaching. Conference grants have been established to support GEF teachers attending conferences closely related to GEF and pedagogy and assessment of GE courses, including conferences organized by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U), the annual conferences of the Association for Core Texts and Courses (ACTC), and the Lilly International Conferences.

### 3. Consultation, Monitoring and Reflection

To solicit both support and feedback of the various stakeholders, during the design stage, focus-groups with students and alumni, and also lunch seminars with GE teachers in the Four Areas were conducted.

During the soft-launch stage, briefing sessions and lunch seminars were organized to inform the university community about the rationale, design and progress of GEF. Queries and concerns were discussed, and comments were considered and incorporated when appropriate (e.g. the inclusion of Qur'an in the syllabus of "In Dialogue of Humanity").

Throughout the various stages of implementation – in fact, even till now, focus-group interviews were conducted after the conclusion of each term for qualitative evaluation. They supplement the quantitative findings of the Course and Teaching Evaluation (CTE). The university-wide CTE itself was also customized to include questions on course and program-specific learning outcomes, student engagement, and students' evaluation of the effectiveness of the selected texts. Various adjustments on both course delivery and course logistics have been made based on such results over time in an ongoing process.

Since 2009, an annual whole-day retreat has been held every summer to provide an opportunity for teachers and administrators involved in GEF to assess students' attainment of learning outcomes, discuss challenges encountered and deliberate on the ways to improve.



## **Criterion 4: Evidence of Improvement and Continuing Commitment to the Processes**

### **1. Evidence of Improvement**

Findings of surveys and focus-groups concord in that GEF has successfully facilitated student transition, enhanced their generic abilities, raised their awareness of diversity in culture and value, and made them more reflective of the meanings and purposes of their learning and life.

#### **1.1. Student Reception, Self-perceived Learning Outcomes and Engagement in CTE**

Despite being compulsory, GEF's Course and Teaching Evaluation (CTE) results have been highly satisfactory. On average, the quality of instruction has scored around 5.4 on a 6-point scale. Furthermore, the scores are highly consistent across different teachers, indicative of a sound syllabus and pedagogical design, team-building and teacher development.

Students consider themselves, after taking a GEF course, to be more capable of engaging in intensive and close reading; confident in reading difficult texts; able to articulate ideas clearly and systematically in writing, and in oral communication. Enhanced abilities in reading, writing and oral communication are of great importance in any disciplines that students may pursue in future.

Student engagement is also much higher in GEF than other GE courses. They are more likely to raise questions and participate in class discussion; more likely to discuss with subject related issues with their teachers outside of class; more likely to discuss subject related issues with other students outside of class; and more likely to have completed the assigned reading.

#### **1.2. GEF Student Focus-group**

In focus-group interviews conducted since the full-launch, students typically reported they had gained, in terms of –

**Knowledge:** better understanding of views about good life, good society, as well as the achievement and limitations of scientific knowledge;

**Skills:** enhanced ability to read, discuss, argue, evaluate, and apply;

**Attitude:** confidence in confronting difficult texts; appreciation of diversity in cultures and ideas;

**Vision:** discover their own taste, views and orientation at personal and societal levels.

#### **1.3. First Year Experience Study**

A study was conducted in 2013-14 by the University's learning centre to investigate students' overall first-year learning experience. In its focus-group interviews, the majority of students expressed that they found the GEF courses "inspiring", having stimulated their critical thinking and provided new ways of thinking and being relevant to their real life experience. There was a general feeling of being "happy to be forced" to explore unfamiliar materials that did not seem to yield immediate, tangible benefits. Furthermore, students also reported the "huge role" of the program in their transition to university study.

In the study's questionnaire survey, GEF courses outperformed the other core-requirement courses in the following areas: promoting teacher-student interaction; giving more than just content knowledge; helping students adapt to university studies, and being relevant to major studies; not overlapping considerably with secondary school materials; challenging in a positive way; and stimulating.

## **2. Continuing Commitment to the Processes**

The evidences collected so far of student attainment of intended learning outcomes have been informative and useful, and attest to the program's success. Yet they do not fall short of being indirect in nature. A longer term, more comprehensive and better integrated assessment of student learning is under construction, which uses students' writing samples as direct evidence of their attainment of the intended learning outcomes. In December 2014, GEF joined the ACTC project of "Qualitative Narrative Assessment" (QNA) and became a member of its second QNA cohort. A group of GEF teachers are engaged in developing appropriate tools to evaluate qualitatively the goals and achievements of the program by close analysis of students' work. As a pilot exercise, the Wolcott-Lynch model has been used to evaluate the level of critical or higher order thinking attained in students' term papers. An interim report was presented in ACTC's Annual Meeting in April 2015 with positive feedback. The QNA project will be carried out in full to trace selected students' development over the course of one year.

Aside from program level efforts, individual teachers have also embarked on research projects to investigate the effectiveness of different teaching and learning methods, or ways to enhance student learning in the classroom. A team of three teachers have designed an Entry-Exit survey in order to trace the change of students' perception of their performance related to the course learning outcomes. Another teacher measures the anxiety level of students with limited knowledge in science and demonstrates that it can be reduced after taking the course "In Dialogue with Nature". Still another teacher compares students' achievement between classes with a group leaders system, and classes without. Financial supports, though limited, are provided to encourage such projects and the publication and dissemination of their results.