

The Implications of General Education in Public Universities in Japan

Taking Osaka University as an Example*

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Abstract—General education originated from the western countries, Japan was the first to accept the western general education mode in Asia. After introduced to Japan, initially general education was fully accepted, which was intensified firmly in positioning and proportioning without considering actual situations, later it was completely rejected. With the college reform launched in 1991, except the University of Tokyo, the general education in all other universities broke up one after another. In recent years, due to attentions and support of social fields, general education in universities start to restore, and the general education departments were rebuilt or newly built. The Osaka University is a top quality university in Japan, where the evolution of general education better reflects characteristics of the general education reform in Japan, which provides an entry point to understand the general education in Japan and provide references for the general education reform in China.

Keywords—Japan; public university; general education; Osaka University

I. INTRODUCTION

General education, the concept, can be traced back to Aristotle, a famous Greek philosopher two thousand years ago. Modern general education originated from the 1990s, in China, general education, the word originated from the translation of a scholar in Taiwan according to general education and liberal education in the mid 1980s. As for the general education, Gu Yuanming thinks that it is an educational thought concerning educational goal and contents as well as relevant education. During the high education stage, it means an education with common contents for college students to accept. Generally it belongs to several subject fields, provides education with wide contents, differing from special education. General education is to educate students to think independently and know about different subjects, flexibly make use of different knowledge and ultimately foster healthy citizens and develop perfect personalities.

After the World War II, Japan started its general education, after decades of exploration, it went from blind pursuit to doubt and rejection to restore, both social consensus

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and governmental policies had huge impacts on its development. Can the development course of general education reform in Japan be used as references for general education in colleges in China? However, it still needs analysis and verification.

II. HISTORICAL CHANGES OF GENERAL EDUCATION IN JAPAN

A. Generation and Development of General Education

During the Meiji period, Japan powerfully introduced western culture, however, it simulated German mode of that time, emphasizing professional education, valuing scientific research, and the general education was borne by senior high schools with ancient systems. After World War II, Japan borrowed the mode of American colleges to renovate the college education, introducing general education, at that time, the general education was translated into common education and later Liberal education [1]. In 1963, the Central Council Education released the *Improvement about College Education*, which clarified goals to set Liberal faculty, 32 Liberal faculties had been set up in Japanese colleges up to 1968.[2]. Initially general education and professional education adopted two-two staged system, that is, students will receive general education with the first two years in colleges and professional education in the last two years. After 1970, the *Standards for the Establishment of Universities* began to be flexible, some colleges had the general education taught in the whole undergraduate education.

B. Recession and Lagging of General Education

After the 1980s, many people thought that general education postponed researches on professional knowledge in the higher education stage, therefore, the general education was reviewed again. In 1991, with the college reform launched, the *Standards for the Establishment of Universities* was greatly modified, aiming to free the colleges to set undergraduate courses so that the colleges could build course systems independently. Specific measures include: reject the distinguishing between professional education and general education, which ended the significance to continue the Liberal faculty for general education, leading to the

dissolution of systems of Liberal faculty. From Kyoto University in 1992 to Hokkaido University in 1995, totaling 4 years, except the University of Tokyo, the 7 leading public universities in Japan had dissolved the Liberal faculties [4]. During the period, for colleges were granted rights to freely set courses, therefore, more colleges carried out “department consistent system”, that is, within four years in colleges, students could receive general education and professional education. The dissolution of Liberal faculty made entire teachers concerned participate in the general education.

Though the college reform restrained the development of general education, yet it had indelible facilitation. The introduction and development of general education were completed within 20 years in Japan, which completely copied American mode without deep consideration as a result, the colleges were confused as basic concepts of general education, and finally the development of general education was not as good as expected. In addition, the colleges only increased the number of courses of general education with quality not considered, and as a result after establishment, the Liberal faculty was not well managed. With the college reform released, colleges launched more discussions on the general education in Japan, combining the concept of general education and talent cultivation, and the general education became an important part of undergraduate courses. Though the number of general education courses was reduced yet the quality was improved greatly. Finally due to the dissolution of Liberal faculty, professional teachers participated in the general education and experienced the pains of Liberal faculty organization, which instead promoted the birth of new powerful executors.

C. Recovery and Revival of General Education

After entering the 21st century, global economic integration makes the society need more compound and all-round talents, therefore, the decade of education mode of disregarding general education and stressing professional education was doubted once again. In 2000, the University Council released a policy consultancy report named *Requirements on Higher Education in the Era of Globalization*, pointing out that in order to keep up with the era of globalization, Japan must cultivate intellectual elites who own thick knowledge and professional skills, active in global stages in the era of globalization, and top universities in Japan are expected to independently build themselves into colleges of letters and science with four-year general education. Led by Ministry of Education, top universities launched a new round of reform. From 2001 when Nagoya University set Liberal Education Department to 2014 when Tohoku University established general education organization, and famous public universities started to establish Liberal departments one after another[4].

Among 90 public universities in Japan, the University of Tokyo, Kyoto University, Osaka University, Nagoya University, Tohoku University, Kyushu University, Hokkaido University are top public universities, this article takes Osaka University as an example to analyze characteristics of general education in public universities in Japan.

III. ANALYSIS OF OSAKA UNIVERSITY

Osaka University is a world famous research public university, in 1931, in order to meet the appeal of the people “establish universities in Osaka” in Tokyo and so on, Osaka Imperial University was established, which was the 6th ancient imperial university in Japan. After world war II, it was renamed into Osaka University.

School running tenet of Osaka University is to “born at local but grow up internationally”, the university thought that general education and professional education are two wings of a bird and two wheels of a car...General education is to cultivate students’ abilities of adapting to social development and technical progress, as well as comprehensive judgment and cute analysis, so that the students could have thick knowledge and rich humanities.

The evolution of general education at Osaka University is typical, as far as the implementation of general education, in 1947, it established Liberal faculty and changed to General Liberal faculty in 1949. With the college reform launched, the Liberal faculty was dissolved in 1994, and a general education institution was established, in 2012, Osaka University set up an education promotion institution. Undergraduates were required to get 124-126 credits; general education courses should reach 40-55 credit, occupying 1/3 of total credit. General education had different requirements on credit of liberal arts and science, for example, Engineering Department requires 51-53 credit, yet Literature Department requires 42 credits only [5].

Osaka University advocates consistent general education from undergraduate to graduate school, general education is almost entire contents of undergraduates within the first three terms, where professional basic education was borne by professional teachers, aiming to better connect general education and professional education.

General education at Osaka University has characteristics as follows:

1. General education consists of four programs, students will be trained to form interdisciplinary views through basic education courses, and besides, they will be trained to form abilities of discussing and thinking social problems and solving social difficulties from multiple subjects and views through modern Liberal courses, such as environmental protection, human rights, juvenile delinquency and so on. The advanced education courses will introduce world top research results, instructing and fostering students’ interests in research. Relying on international cultural knowledge and language teaching, the international liberal education course aims to cultivate students’ abilities of communicating with the world.

2. Foreign courses in Osaka University are diverse and clear in goals. In 2007, Osaka University of Foreign Studies and Osaka University were merged to set up a Foreign Language Department, which provided majors of 25 languages, courses of about 30 languages were taught, mini classes were provided for teaching. Modern education techniques were adopted such as CALL and ESP so as to cultivate students’ abilities of high quality language and culture as well as foreign language application.

3. Value students' self studying, a typical point to reflect it is basic discussion course, in 1994, it set a basic discussion course featuring dialogue, experience and mini class (ten students each class). In 2010, the discussion course was improved in form that is, according to students' learning progress, students can select basic courses or advanced courses. As for the basic course, teaches or assistant teachers establish research groups; as for the advanced courses, the groups can select instructors freely, conduct investigation and research and make research achievements open to the public. The courses aimed to cultivate students' abilities of correction judgment, enterprise planning, management, communication, learning attitude and so on. Currently teachers in the university have about 2200 courses to teach, about 160 of which are basic research courses.

From 2008 on, Osaka University started to hold discussions concerning general education regularly per year, where students, teachers and staffs participated and discuss problems and improvement strategies of general education. President, educational information director, department (research offices and centers) principals, practice center directors and so on will regularly discuss the general education. The university joint development system for general education is a distinct feature of Osaka University [5].

IV. CONCLUSION

We can get experience from the general education of public universities in Japan, and the details are given as follows:

1. Generally majors are determined according to scores in enrollment for universities in China, as a result, most students know little of majors of their own, having no any interest at all, so many students have their majors transferred. Even so some are still dissatisfied. Speaking relatively students are distributed to different departments with majors not considered in Japan, basic general courses are taught by professional teachers so that students will get deep knowledge about all subjects before setting goals and selecting majors so as to improve the enthusiasm in learning.

2. Though Chinese college students participate in voluntary activities, yet they have little enthusiasm in social activities. However, in Japan, college students are encouraged to participate in social activities and hold parties with residents around, visit local famous enterprises, interview celebrities and so on, through implicit learning, the students' abilities of cooperation, organization and communication are exercised.

3. In most of schools of foreign languages in China, there are only English, Korean and French set, but few of other foreign languages, yet in public universities in Japan, in addition to English, many other foreign languages are set as well for students to choose freely.

4. Lack of faculties, the problem can be found in both China and Japan. In Japan, only the University of Tokyo has solved the problem. China is a severe situation in faculties, and as a result, there are fewer courses set and more students arranged in the same class. In Japan, public universities encourage all teachers to participate in the general education,

so there are more courses set and wider scope involved. In addition, during the general education, the proportion of small class for discussions is higher, where students are highly independent and there are more international courses.

5. The current general education in China is just similar to that in Japan before college reforms, and no deeper researches are conducted on basic theories of general education, and the numbers of general education courses are increased blindly ye ignoring the quality.

Finally we've got an enlightenment from the development of general education in Japan, the general education just cannot be copied, it must be based on actual conditions of the country, and theories must be connected to practices, besides, during the practice, all departments in colleges shall keep high cooperation and make up for the deficiency in time through summarizing experience.

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