

Evaluation of the Intended General Education Curriculum in Undergraduate Higher Education: A Qualitative Study from the Perspectives of Students and faculty members

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to evaluate the intended general education curriculum in undergraduate education in Iran from the perspectives of students and faculty members. The research employed a qualitative program evaluation approach. A total of 11 faculty members specializing in general education curriculum and 31 undergraduate students from various academic disciplines at universities in Tehran were selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis with a deductive approach. The evaluation of the intended general education curriculum based on the criteria of realism, advancement, adaptability, and scientific credibility revealed several key challenges, including the lack of accessible learning outcomes, inadequate content coverage, low student motivation and engagement, failure to foster independent and lifelong learning, misalignment between learning outcomes and stakeholder expectations, weak organization of infrastructural resources, and outdated learning objectives. Overall, revising the general education curriculum in Iranian higher education to address students' diverse academic and cultural needs and support their personal and social development could serve as a strategy for improving the quality of education, as recommended for policymakers and curriculum planners.

Keywords: Higher education, evaluation, general education curriculum, intended curriculum



Introduction

Improving the quality of higher education curricula to align with both individual and societal needs is an undeniable necessity. Some researchers (Biggs, Tang, & Kennedy, 2022) argue that the curriculum, as one of the fundamental pillars of the higher education system, plays a key role in educating students and developing the knowledge and skills necessary for life and employment. In this regard, general education curricula are designed to enhance critical thinking skills, communication skills, and interdisciplinary understanding among students (Gaston, 2010). These curricula not only influence the development of general knowledge and information, but also contribute to the strengthening of students' cultural and social perspectives (Gaston, 2010; Barnett, 2014). In Iran's higher education system, general education courses are mandatory for all students, whereas in many other countries, these courses are offered as elective and are more diverse (Arefi, Ghahremani, & Rezaeizadeh, 2008). Given the rapid cultural and technological changes in developing countries, continuous evaluation of these courses is essential to align them with the needs of society and the labor market (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Evaluating general education curricula can help improve educational quality and ensure that course content is aligned with societal needs and the labor market (Trevisan et al., 2024; Harden, 2001). Various evaluation models, such as the CIPP model (Stufflebeam, 2003), especially in qualitative evaluation, can provide a clear picture of the effectiveness of curricula and reveal hidden and qualitative aspects from the perspectives of both faculty members and students (Patton, 2014). Different learning theories, such as constructivism (Kommers, 2003) and experiential learning, also emphasize the need for curricula to be flexible and responsive to the needs of students and society, thereby enhancing skills necessary for employment and lifelong learning (Steffens, 2015).

International and domestic studies show that general education courses in higher education play a significant role in developing students' critical thinking, creativity, and social skills (Almulla, 2023; Ab Kadir, 2018). In Iran, studies have indicated that the current state of general education courses, in terms of objectives, content, teaching methods, and evaluation practices, is not ideal, and there is a need for reforms in this area (Azizi, Sadeghi & Abdollahi, 2022). Research suggests that establishing a connection between general education courses and societal needs can have positive effects on the quality of education (Azizi et al., 2022). Therefore, the present study is designed to evaluate the general education curriculum and explore the experiences of students and faculty in this regard.

Methodology

The present study falls under the umbrella of the "Evaluation Research Approach." In this context, in line with the research objective, the CIPP evaluation model, comprising four components—context, input, process, and product—was used for evaluating the undergraduate general education curriculum in higher education with a qualitative approach (Stufflebeam, 2000).

The participants in this study included instructors of general education courses and undergraduate students from various academic disciplines at universities in Tehran. Accordingly, the participants were divided into two groups: (1) Instructors of general education courses at public universities in Tehran, and (2) final-year undergraduate students and graduates. In the second group, purposive sampling was used, and the sampling process continued until theoretical saturation was reached. A sample consisting of 31 final-year undergraduate students was purposively selected, ensuring maximum variation in academic disciplines, along with 11 instructors of general education courses from various disciplines and universities. In this study, face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used, in which the questions are predefined, but their sequence may change based on the interviewer's perception of the situation. Additionally, inappropriate questions may be removed or revised during the research process (Van Teijlingen, 2014). The semi-structured interviews were conducted according to the interview protocol. The analysis of the interview texts was conducted using thematic analysis with a deductive approach. To maintain ethical considerations, the rights of the participants were respected throughout the conduct of this research. In this study, the validation of the research findings was carried out throughout the research process using the following strategies: (1) member checking, (2) triangulation, (3) peer review, and (4) transferability of the findings.

Findings

The general curriculum in Iranian universities lacks clear and specific guidelines regarding the learning outcomes at the program level. The analysis of the intended general curriculum based on the criteria of feasibility, advancement, adaptability, and academic credibility revealed that the key current issues include the lack of accessible learning outcomes, disproportionate content coverage, absence of student motivation and engagement, failure to foster independent and lifelong learning capacity, misalignment of learning outcomes with the needs and expectations of educational stakeholders, weakness in organizing infrastructural resources, and outdated learning outcomes.

Regarding the "advanced nature of the general curriculum," two themes were emphasized by the participants: "increased enthusiasm for learning" and "creating the capacity for independent and lifelong learning." Additionally, the thematic analysis of the theme "alignment of learning outcomes with the needs and expectations of stakeholders" led to the identification of two key concepts: "reviewing current courses for alignment with needs" and "identifying the current educational needs of undergraduate students in Iran."

Conclusion

This study evaluates the general curriculum in the undergraduate system of higher education in Iran, identifying its strengths and weaknesses based on the perspectives of students and faculty members. The findings suggest that the learning outcomes of the general curriculum are not in an optimal condition from four perspectives: "realism," "advancement," "adaptability," and "scientific credibility." These results highlight significant challenges in meeting the educational and cultural needs of students in general education courses.

In analyzing the theme of "realism," two sub-themes emerged: "inaccessible learning outcomes" and "unbalanced content coverage of learning outcomes." According to students and faculty members the heavy emphasis on religious courses in the general curriculum reduces student interest and weakens the interdisciplinary nature of the curriculum. This finding aligns with similar research, such as Mushtaq Mehr (2006), which indicates a lack of shared understanding among curriculum planners, textbook authors, instructors, and students regarding the purpose and rationale of including religious courses in non-literary academic programs.

The theme of "advancement" was also analyzed, with two sub-themes: "creating the capacity for independent and lifelong learning" and "engaging interest." It was found that the general curriculum in Iran does not foster skill-based learning and does not encourage lifelong learning or student curiosity. These findings align with global educational practices, such as those at Howard University, which prioritizes the development of skills for lifelong learning. Students' decreasing interest in the curriculum further supports the need for more engaging content. In analyzing the theme of "adaptability," two sub-themes were identified: "alignment of learning outcomes with stakeholders' needs and expectations" and "organization of human and infrastructural resources to achieve learning outcomes." The study emphasized the need to revise the curriculum and course content to align with students' actual needs. This would enhance the educational effectiveness and equip students to face real-world challenges. These findings are consistent with previous studies, such as those by Kaviyani and Nasr (2016), which highlight the importance of aligning the curriculum with the cultural and social needs of the community.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that the general curriculum in the undergraduate system of higher education in Iran requires more attention to address the real and diverse needs of students. Additionally, the content of general education courses should be designed more balanced and based on interdisciplinary competencies to better meet the educational and cultural needs of students.

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