

Beyond Regional Culture: A Comparative Study of Undergraduate General Education Curricula in Iran and Selected Middle Eastern Universities

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ABSTRACT

Although the undergraduate general education curriculum is often hailed as the conscience of higher education, its philosophical foundations remain underexplored in Iran. This comparative study aimed to compare the general curriculum of the undergraduate course of the Iranian higher education system with the American University of Cairo, the American University of Sharjah, Qatar University, King Abdulaziz University, and KOC University. This study employed a qualitative approach using comparative analysis. Universities were purposively chosen for their shared sociocultural contexts but divergent educational outcomes. The findings reveal that, with the exception of King Abdulaziz University in Saudi Arabia and Iran's own general education curriculum, all examined universities have embraced an interdisciplinary model integrating the humanities, social sciences, economics, natural sciences, and communication studies. These universities offer a wider, more diverse selection of courses, align their learning outcomes with local, national, and global priorities, and operate under flexible curricular frameworks. Consequently, Iranian higher education, to enhance quality, should adopt an interdisciplinary framework and balance knowledge, skills, and attitudes within its general education curriculum.

Keywords: *Interdisciplinary approach, general education curriculum, curriculum breadth, educational policymaking, undergraduate education.*

Introduction

The general education curriculum serves as a cornerstone for fostering lifelong learning and equipping students to navigate the scientific, social, and economic transformations of the 21st century (Association of American Colleges & Universities, 2015). Globally, such curricula are continuously evolving to address complex contemporary demands, enabling learners not only to adapt to rapid change but also to critically engage with diverse values and contradictions (Fen & Ghulam Murtaza, 2017). Iran's undergraduate general education curriculum (IUGEC) is offered at two levels, compulsory and optional, with a minimum of 22 and a maximum of 26 credits, and can be categorized into seven clusters: "Theoretical Foundations of Islam", "Islamic Ethics", "Islamic Revolution" and "Islamic History and Civilization", "Physical Education and Lifestyle", "Communication Skills" and "Optional General curriculum".

Evaluations of the general education curriculum in Iran reveal widespread dissatisfaction. Studies report that the assessment procedures for the "General English Language" course are unsatisfactory (Mohammadi et al., 2018). Although, Islamic education courses positively affect students' insight and attitudes, the necessity of several courses such as "Islamic thought," "Islamic ethics," "Islamic revolution," and "Islamic history and civilization" has been judged low quality (Qasempoor et al., 2017). In priority rankings, "general foreign language" and "family and population knowledge" emerge as more important, while the objectives of the "public persian literature" course require revision and psychological, communication, and life skills have been insufficiently addressed (Arefi, Mahboobeh et al., 2009). Policymakers and planners have therefore called for a comprehensive curriculum revision to better meet students' scientific and cultural needs and to foster their personal and social development (Pirzadi & Khaleghinezhad, 2025).

Since the revision of the general education curriculum as a complex process requires access to international evidence and experiences. The present study, focusing on general education curriculum, in countries in the region with cultural and social similarities close to Iran seeks to identify similarities and differences in order to benefit from successful experiences to improve the quality of the general curriculum in Iran.

Methodology

This study is applied in purpose and qualitative in approach, aiming to inform and improve decision-making. To compare IUGEC with those of major universities in the Middle East, the Bereday's comparative method was adopted (Wilcke & Budke, 2019). The unit of analysis is the general education curriculum, examined through four sequential stages. In the description stage, documentary evidence related to the program—course clusters, learning outcomes, and other instructional materials—was systematically collected and recorded. In the interpretation stage, these records were analyzed from multiple perspectives to deepen understanding of the curriculum. In the juxtaposition stage, findings were organized into categories and a comparative framework was developed to highlight patterns of similarity and difference. In the comparison stage, that framework was used to analyze the identified similarities and differences in detail and to draw conclusions aligned with the study's goals (Fen & Ghulam Murtaza, 2017).

The study population comprised general education curricula from universities that have close historical, educational, social, cultural, and religious background with Iran. The sampled universities were: the American University in Cairo (AUC), the American University of Sharjah (AUS), Gatar University (QU), King Abdulaziz University (KAU), and Koç University (KU). Universities were selected according to the "most similar systems with similar outcomes" strategy (Berg-Schlosser, 2001), ensuring comparability while allowing focus on meaningful differences in curricular design and implementation.

Findings

A comparative study of general education curricula in Iranian higher education and selected Middle Eastern universities—after the four stages of description, interpretation, juxtaposition, and comparison—yielded findings across three main components.

Interdisciplinary versus disciplinary orientation: The AUC, KU, AUS, and QU implement broadly interdisciplinary general education curricula that expose students to diverse fields and strengthen their ability to analyze issues from both local and global perspectives. By contrast, IUGEC and the KAU remain more narrowly disciplinary, placing greater emphasis on transmitting cultural values and doctrinal content within students' learning experiences. The interdisciplinary model,

intentionally integrates humanities, social sciences, arts, economics, mathematics, and natural sciences to improve problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and innovation skills that support deeper understanding of complex phenomena in local and global contexts (DeZure, 2010).

Credits: A comparison of general education requirements shows that IUGEC and the KAU have the lowest course loads, typically between 22 and 26 credits. The other universities in the sample—The AUS, KU, AUC, and QU—offer more diverse and flexible curricula, with general education loads ranging from 18 to 45 credits, and The AUS carrying the heaviest requirement at 45 credits. These variations reflect differing educational philosophies and the relative breadth of each curriculum.

Learning outcomes: Across the region, general education curricula span a broad knowledge continuum that includes the humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, arts, personal development, and technology. IUGEC and the KAU place greater emphasis on Islamic, religious, ethical, and cultural content, whereas the AUS, KU, AUC, and QU adopt a multidisciplinary emphasis that balances humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, arts, and skills for analysis and communication. In skills domain, IUGEC prioritizes written and oral communication, ethics, and social responsibility, with comparatively less emphasis on emotional-social competencies and physical well-being. The KAU highlights digital literacy alongside communication skills. The general education curriculum at the AUS, KU, AUC, and QU emphasize a broader set of capabilities, including communication, critical thinking, quantitative reasoning, aesthetic appreciation, social ethics, and technological literacy. In domain of attitudes and values, IUGEC and the KAU foreground positive dispositions toward religious values. By contrast, the AUS, KU, AUC, and QU pursue a more integrated approach that maintains respect for Islamic values while actively promoting intercultural awareness, social responsibility, and positive orientations toward the arts and the environment. IUGEC do address moral responsibility and environmental sensitivity, aligning it in part with the broader regional trend toward civic and environmental awareness.

Conclusion

This study compared IUGEC with those of five selected Middle Eastern universities. The findings highlight clear contrasts in structure, scope, and educational priorities. IUGEC is centralized, disciplinary, and relatively inflexible. It requires a few numbers of units that are heavily weighted toward Islamic and religious cultural courses (for example, Islamic studies, Islamic history, and related subjects). Although a recent optional package covering environment, entrepreneurship, and life skills has been approved, it is not mandatory and student uptake is not yet documented. Overall, the current curriculum gives students limited exposure to cross cutting topics—financial literacy, aesthetics, digital skills, economics, and critical thinking are underrepresented compared with contemporary global models. By contrast, general education curricula of Koç, Cairo, Sharjah, and Qatar universities emphasize broader, more flexible frameworks. These universities allocate a substantial portion of the undergraduate curriculum to general requirements, use cluster models, and distribute credits across diverse fields. While preserving cultural identity, their curricula intentionally foster critical thinking, intercultural awareness, technological and analytical skills, and global competence.

Overall, to raise the quality and relevance of IUGEC, policymakers and higher education leaders should pursue interdisciplinary reforms that balance cultural identity with global needs. A revised curriculum should retain and honor Iranian religious values while expanding students' exposure to transferable skills and knowledge domains—intercultural competence, professional readiness, critical reasoning, and digital and financial literacies. Achieving this balance would reduce the risk of cultural rupture, open new path for international engagement, and better prepare graduates to be versatile, responsible citizens in a complex global environment.

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