General Education in the International Islamic University Malaysia: A Reflection on the Experience of Department General Studies

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ABSTRAK


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INTRODUCTION

The Department of General Studies (DGS) was established in December 2, 1996, under the Revealed Knowledge Division of the Kulliyyah (Faculty) of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences (IRKHS), almost 13 years after the establishment of IIUM in 1983. Its vision is to serve the University and Kulliyyah in revitalizing the intellectual dynamism and actualizing students' potentials through integrating Islamic Revealed Knowledge and values in all academic disciplines and activities. The department functions as a service department with the objective of offering Islamic introductory courses to all university students and skill courses to the students of the Kulliyyah of IRKHS. Three Islamic introductory courses are The Islamic Worldview (UNGS 2030), Islam Knowledge and Civilization (UNGS 2040), and Ethics and Fiqh for Everyday Life (UNGS 2050), while three skill courses are Creative Thinking (RKGS 2010), Parenting (RKGS 2020), and Research Methodology (RKGS 2999).

With these only six courses, the DGS of IIUM might be one of the smallest departments with the least number of courses in Malaysia, incomparable with the other local universities especially MARA University Technology, UTM and University Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM). In many universities, locally or internationally, courses related to languages are also placed under DGS. At IIUM, language courses are placed under one separated center known as Centre for Languages and Pre-University Academic Development (CELPAD). Serving around three thousands students each semester, the Department is currently blessed with 23 high qualified academic staff who are well-experienced in teaching and research with various specializations from different world recognized institutions of high learning.

A GLANCE INTO GENERAL STUDIES' MAJOR COURSES AND THE ASPIRATION OF IIUM

The raison d'être of the DGS of IIUM is in line with the common objective and philosophy of general education in the world. It aims at, besides complementing the rest of the curriculum, linking the undergraduate experience to the lives students will lead after graduation. Since only a few required courses are offered by DGS of IIUM, and they are very unique, reflecting the uniqueness of IIUM itself, it is good therefore to look briefly at some of them.
THE ISLAMIC WORLDVIEW (UNGS 2030)

One of the objectives of introducing general education is to teach students to understand themselves as products of, and participants in, traditions of art, ideas and values. As in the case of IIUM, bearing Islam as its identity, Islam should be the distinct demarcation of its products distinguishing it from others. It is not too extreme to say that this course, considering its importance to IIUM, is like Shahadatayn to a Muslim. Whatever the students' professions are, be it a lawyer, an engineer, an architect, a doctor, Islam and its values should be reflected on their behaviors and thoughts.

The course highlights the students on the elements of Islamic worldview like God, Revelation, man, knowledge, values and virtues and their applications and significance to the individual and collective life. Students are also taught about modern ideologies like postmodernism, secularism, materialism; and challenges such as globalization, liberalism and extremism. Since it mostly deals with the basic concepts of Islam, this course is made pre-requisite for the other two following subjects.

ISLAM, KNOWLEDGE AND CIVILIZATION (UNGS 2040)

Another objective of general education is to educate a person to have an understanding of other cultures to enable one to conduct life with reference to the wider world within which one lives or experiences. This can be realized through learning other civilizations. For that purpose, in Malaysian context, one course focusing on the subject matter was designed and made compulsory, namely Tamadun Islam and Tamadun Asia (TITAS). In IIUM, however, an equivalent course with different name and bigger scope is designed and named Islam, Knowledge and Civilization (IKC). Its contents, as reflected in its name, cover not only the physical aspects of civilization per se, but also the spiritual elements underlying the development of a civilization, namely the religion and knowledge or sciences. After completion of the course, students are able to understand other civilizations, their causes of rise and fall, and awareness of the challenges as well as the possible ways to revive Muslim civilization.

ETHICS AND FIQH FOR EVERYDAY LIFE (UNGS 2050)

As reflected in the name itself, this course is designed to equip students with the ability to apply knowledge gained in everyday living. It is rich with the skills and formula for evaluating their thoughts and behaviors to make responsible
decision in line with the universal principles of Islam. It is also to help students developing works habits and ethics necessary to function effectively in their professional life. The course starts with educating student on the principles of *fiqh* at the first part and applying those principles in the second part. It prepares also the students to face some major issues in their real life like transsexuals, organ transplantation, solutions to infertile spouse, and issues related to modern transactions. In line with the national aspiration of 1 Malaysian, the course also enlightens students about necessity, challenges and solutions in creating a harmonious multiracial society.

**CREATIVE THINKING (RKGS 2010)**

Most of the higher educational institutions in the world embrace this universal course. It is very significant to be taken by the students before their graduation. It helps them to be creative as well as critical which is in line with the philosophy of general education, namely an educated person must be able to think and to respond critically and constructively to change. At IIUM however, besides containing all the current developments in the field, the course is value-laden with Islamic perspective where students not only can apply those skills in their lives but also appreciate the contributions of Islam in the field. Realizing its importance, the course which is made compulsory only to the students of the *Kulliyyah* of IRKHS, should also be extended and made compulsory to all students of IIUM. The other two skill courses, namely Parenting (RKGS 2020) which is only made elective and Research Methodology (RKGS 2999) which is offered also by other departments, are not as active as the above four compulsory courses, in the sense that they are not regularly offered every semester by the Department.

**CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS**

Since its inception in the end of 1996, the department has been encountering many challenges. Besides common challenges in designing modules and programs, there is a more difficult and universal challenge faced by not only DGS of IIUM, but also all DGS of local universities, namely the challenge of perception.
CHALLENGES RELATED TO OTHER FACULTIES

Other faculty members, some of them, ranging from the top and straight down to the students, view the required courses as unnecessary burden and disturbing liability. They are not able to digest the wisdom of offering these courses, to the extent that, they consider these courses as not important. Consequently, this negative perception is being portrayed in their action. For example, they do not want their students to be disturbed into taking these required subjects in an ordinary semester by not allotting single hours to be slotted therein. Therefore, the only time available is during the short semester session which is around seven week time.

What would be expected from a learning process which is ordinarily done in more than three month being contracted into seven weeks? What is deteriorating is that, in the normal semester, students are required to enroll in the subjects one after another (one becomes the prerequisite to the other), but in certain cases, students are asked to do the three subjects simultaneously within a short semester where normally other students are allowed to take two courses only. Extreme and overburdening is the right words to describe this happening. Three injustices are done, one to the courses and second to the students and three to the DGS where the department has to allocate lecturers to go to a distant place and teach during different academic calendar. This requires necessary and urgent actions to be taken to solve this problem. As a service department, some members of the faculties think that the DGS has no other choices except to accommodate with all their needs although sometime are not practical. Another unwelcomed action that reflects the marginalization of these general studies courses is that some lecturers simply take the time allotted for these courses in order to make their course examinations and class replacements.

CHALLENGES RELATED TO STUDENTS

Students, in line with the perception of their faculties, register and come to the class with the “just to fulfill the requirement” mentality, demotivated and this affects their performance. Based on eight years teaching in the department, students, after attending the class, can be classified into three major categories. First, which is the highest in number, is those who just want to get rid of these subjects as fast possible, second, those who think that the courses of general studies are simple and come with the hope that they might score well, and thus help in improving their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) and finally, which is the least, are those who enjoy and appreciate the subjects, thinking that the knowledge they gain here cannot be found at their respective faculties. In dealing with these categories of people, it requires lecturer to be full of patient and wisdom.
CHALLENGES RELATED TO DEPARTMENTAL STAFF

As mentioned before, the department has 25 academic staff with various specializations. With the introduction of Key Performance Index (KPI) under the administration of current Government, all staff are pressed to meet their specified KPI. At IIUM, supervision is one the criteria that generally all academic staff with PhD need to fulfill. This has placed staff of DGS in difficulty. As a service department, although serving thousands of students per semester (3061 students in semester 2, session 2009/2010), it does not have its own students. Furthermore, the department also does not have post graduate studies. As a result, many of DGS’s staff have failed to get supervision.

SUGGESTED PROACTIVE SOLUTIONS

Despite many problems faced by the department, it is good to say that the higher authority of the IIUM especially the Dean of the Kulliyyah of IRKHS, where the DGS is, is very supportive and understanding. Any issue that cannot be solved at the department level will be brought to the faculty level, and normally the desirable solution would be achieved. Taking supervision as example, the faculty has agreed not to include supervision as one of the criteria for the staff of General Studies to fulfill their KPI. It is also good to mention that starting semester 1 2009/2010, the department was able to bring down the number of students in one class from 60 to 70 before to 35 and 40. This enables the department to give proper monitoring thus ensuring quality teaching to the students. Regarding the supervision, the department has been proactively working with other departments in the faculty of IRKHS in trying to get their help in giving their postgraduate students to the staff of DGS for supervision. At this date, almost half of the lectures already have supervisees.

FUTURE PLANNING

For the short term planning, the department is struggling to develop at least two diploma courses that are open for the public, namely the Diploma of Creative Thinking and the Diploma of Parenting. Besides doing its service to public, this will also help the university in generating income as well strengthen the survival cause of DGS. The department also needs to prepare if the suggestion to make Creative Thinking compulsory to all IIUM’s students is accepted by the higher authority.
Meanwhile, for the long term planning, the department wishes to design and offer few courses intended not only for the undergraduates but also for postgraduates. This will help in solving the problem of supervision. Inspired by general studies of UKM (a centre) and UTM (a faculty by itself), and as to ensure more efficiency and autonomy, the department also determines to improve its status to be a centre or an institute. This undeniably requires extra efforts from the members of the departments as well as the support from the higher authorities, that is, the Kulliyyahs and the University.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, despite many challenges and weaknesses overshadowing the general studies, the university has no other choices except to overcome them. Marginalizing general studies will move the university backward. For the betterment of this department, some proactive actions should be considered which are among others:

1. Rebranding general studies to ensure accurate and proper perception of the university communities,
2. Establishing good relationship and cooperation with the university’s faculties based on reciprocal needs and understandings
3. Introducing more demand-based courses and stepping up aggressive efforts in marketing them to the public. This is in line with the gradual move by the government to make universities self dependant or self-funded,
4. Strengthening relationships and cooperation among the departments in the Kulliyyah of IRKHS and other Kulliyyahs of IIUM,
5. Organizing more meetings, dialogues and conferences to bring awareness on the progress and development of general studies at the university, national as well as international levels,
6. Ensuring that any constructive change and modification on the national higher education systems and the university must take into consideration the interest of general studies.

It is hope that with the highlights of some obstacles and suggested proactive solutions will make the DGS in particular and IIUM in general flourish further.
REFERENCES


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