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ROLE OF GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES IN DEVELOPING ATTITUDE AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract

General Education (GE) courses are designed to expand undergraduate learning beyond the major discipline and to develop students' attitudes toward learning, ethical values, social responsibility, and respect for diversity. Under the Undergraduate Education Policy 2023 of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, GE courses are now a compulsory component of all BS programs, yet little empirical evidence exists on their attitudinal outcomes. This study examined the impact of GE courses on the attitudes of undergraduate students and recommended ways to increase their effectiveness. The design was quantitative, cross-sectional survey. A stratified random sample of 300 BS students (Years 2-4) was selected from public sector and private universities of Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. Data were collected using a structured 45-item questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale involving five attitude dimensions and reliability coefficients ranging from $\alpha = 0.85$ to $\alpha = 0.91$. The descriptive analysis revealed that ethical values had the highest mean ($M = 4.02$, $SD = 0.59$), followed by attitude toward learning ($M = 3.89$, $SD = 0.62$), tolerance and respect for diversity ($M = 3.82$, $SD = 0.65$), and social responsibility ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 0.68$). Personal and social development was the lowest rated ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.71$). The mean attitude was 3.84 ($SD = 0.58$), showing that undergraduate students generally held positive attitudes. These findings suggest a potential role for GE courses in the ethical, social, and personal development of students. The study suggests that GE curricula should include explicit objectives for attitude development, that student-centred and experiential teaching methods should be used, that faculty development should be strengthened, and that regular course evaluation and student feedback should be used to improve GE teaching.

Keywords: *Attitude Development, Ethical Values, General Education Courses, Social Responsibility, Tolerance, Undergraduate Students*

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1. Introduction

Education is very important in all-round development of the students. It provides knowledge and skills, and helps students to develop positive attitudes, values and responsible ways of behaving. Undergraduate students experience a formative stage of personal, social and intellectual development. During these years, their views of society, of learning, of culture, and of others are still coming into being. This is the time when young adults develop competence, manage emotions, move toward interdependence, establish identity, and clarify purpose and integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). General Education courses are one of the key curricular spaces for universities to intentionally support this growth.

Higher education today is moving further away from models that are solely about the transmission of disciplinary content. Furthermore, it is anticipated that universities prepare graduates with subject expertise and transferable competencies, civic awareness and good values (UNESCO, 2015). This shift has been reinforced by changing labour-market demands. In addition to technical knowledge, employers are now looking for graduates who can communicate, collaborate, adapt and act ethically (Suleman, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2020). The Council of Europe (2018) also considers values, attitudes and critical understanding as central to the competences needed to participate democratically. So attitudes are not understood as a consequence of education but as an outcome of education.

An attitude is a learned predisposition to respond to an object, idea, person, or situation with some degree of favor or disfavor (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). Attitudes consist of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components and affect how people interpret experience and select actions. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior states that intentions and behavior are influenced by attitudes, social norms and perceived control. Furthermore, Bandura's (1977) social learning theory suggests that attitudes are learned through observation, modeling and reinforcement within a social environment. Thus, classrooms, teachers, and peers become important sources of attitude learning.

General Education courses are designed to provide students with knowledge outside of their major field of study. These usually include courses in communication skills, humanities, social sciences, ethics, civic education, quantitative reasoning, and environmental or scientific literacy. They expose students to different ideas, cultures and social issues. In these courses, students learn to respect others, think critically, work with people with different backgrounds and make responsible decisions. Such a liberal education, according to Nussbaum (1997), develops the capacity for self-reflection, an understanding of oneself as a citizen of a larger world, and the ability to imagine the lives of others.

There is a strong theoretical case for the attitudinal role of education. Dewey (1938) states that education is closely related to the experiences of students and their social environment. "Learning should prepare learners to comprehend real life situations and develop into responsible members of a democratic society," he said. The taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom et al., 1956) was extended to the affective domain by Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia (1964). This domain includes receiving, responding, valuing, organizing and characterizing values. Attitudes, interests and feelings are accepted as valid learning outcomes. In this perspective education should develop positive attitudes and values with knowledge.

This view is supported by empirical research on college impact. Astin (1993) identified student involvement in academic and social activities as one of the strongest predictors of college students' learning and development. Through active participation in discussions, group work and other learning

experiences, students can build stronger communication skills, social understanding and positive attitudes. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reviewed decades of research and concluded that higher education impacts students' intellectual, personal, moral, and social development. College experiences teach students to think critically, to appreciate the diversity of perspectives, and to develop more open attitudes about social and cultural issues. High-impact practices such as common intellectual experiences, collaborative assignments, diversity learning, and service learning were identified by Kuh (2008) as especially effective in promoting these outcomes. Many of these practices are naturally integrated into GE classes.

But the impact of GE courses isn't guaranteed. Their contribution is dependent on the teaching methods, content of the course, climate in the classroom and involvement of students. Kolb (1984) postulates the experiential learning theory, whereby the learning becomes meaningful when the student goes through concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization and active experimentation. Discussion, case analysis, group projects, community engagement and reflective writing are interactive methods that help students relate theoretical knowledge with real life experience. Lecture-based delivery of GE courses as minor requirements may diminish their attitudinal value. Likewise, Ehrlich (2000) argued that civic responsibility is cultivated when academic study is connected to active engagement in the community.

In Pakistan, the HEC Undergraduate Education Policy 2023 required a set of General Education courses for all BS programs. The policy is intended to produce graduates who are competent in their disciplines and are also well-rounded, ethically grounded and socially responsible (Higher Education Commission, 2023). Now that the policy is in place, it is time to consider whether GE courses are related to the positive attitudes they are meant to develop. This study addresses this question by analyzing the attitudes of undergraduate students on five dimensions: attitude toward learning, social responsibility, tolerance and respect for diversity, ethical values, and personal and social development.

1.1. Rationale of the Study

General Education courses are an important part of an undergraduate education. They seek to equip students with knowledge, skills, values and experiences that foster their holistic development. But in practice undergraduate programs tend to place more emphasis on disciplinary knowledge and job-specific skills. Sometimes students and faculty see GE courses as peripheral requirements to be fulfilled, rather than as meaningful learning experiences. Consequently, during curriculum planning, teaching and assessment, limited consideration may be given to the role of their contribution to the development of students' attitudes.

Students need to have positive attitudes to succeed in their academic, personal and social lives. A positive attitude toward learning encourages persistence and lifelong learning. Social responsibility and ethical values equip graduates for responsible citizenship and professional integrity. In a pluralistic society such as Pakistan where students belong to different linguistic, cultural, religious and socio-economic backgrounds, tolerance and respect for diversity are especially important. Personal and social development builds the foundation of confidence, communication and healthy relationships.

Despite the policy's focus on the significance of GE courses since 2023, there is limited empirical evidence on the attitudinal outcomes of GE courses on Pakistani undergraduates. Most available studies focus on students' academic achievement or employability skills, while the affective outcomes of GE courses are rarely measured. There are a number of groups who need evidence such

as this. It is needed by the policymakers at HEC to determine if the GE framework is meeting its desired objectives. It is needed by university administrators and curriculum developers to plan and revise GE courses. Teachers need it to choose teaching strategies that will promote the development of attitudes.

Therefore, the study examined the attitudes of undergraduate students who took GE courses in five dimensions. It shows where attitudes are strongest and where they need to be addressed further. The findings are expected to contribute to the literature on General Education in developing contexts and to inform the enhancement of GE curricula, teaching practices and evaluation practices at Pakistani universities.

1.2. Purposes of the Study

The following objectives guided the study

- To explore the effect of General Education courses on undergraduate students' academic attitudes, especially their attitudes toward learning.
- To investigate the contribution of General Education courses to the development of positive social attitudes such as social responsibility, tolerance and respect for diversity among undergraduate students.
- To determine the level of ethical values and personal and social development of the undergraduate students who have taken General Education courses.
- To suggest improvements in the role of General Education courses in developing the students' attitudes.

1.3. Research Question

- The attitude toward learning of undergraduate students in the course of studying General Education courses
- What is the level of students' tolerance and respect for diversity and their social responsibility?
- How much do students report positive ethical values and personal and social development?
- What are the dominant attitude dimensions and what are the needs of the General Education curricula?

1.4. Research Design

The present study was a quantitative, descriptive, cross sectional survey design to explore the role of General Education courses in the development of attitudes of undergraduate students. A survey design was chosen as it allows for the systematic measurement of variables in a large and dispersed sample at a single point in time and generates findings that can inform policy and practice (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target population included all the BS students enrolled in the General Education courses under the Undergraduate Education Policy 2023 in the HEC recognized public and private universities of Pakistan. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure representative coverage by university type (public and private) and geographical region. The sample was drawn from universities in Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan. The sample size of 300 BS students was surveyed with confidence level of 95% and margin error of ±5.66% based on Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table for sample size determination and considering non-response. Participants were included if they were enrolled in Years 2–4 of a BS program in a university recognized by HEC, had completed at least 2 General Education courses, and were willing to participate voluntarily with informed consent. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers

based on a review of literature on student attitudes, values, and college outcomes (Astin, 1993; Krathwohl et al., 1964; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), with items adapted from established instruments and relevant studies. The questionnaire contained three sections. Section A collected demographic data such as age, gender, university type, academic discipline, and academic year. Section B addressed exposure to General Education courses: the number of courses completed, the types of courses taken, and students' perceptions of the quality of instruction. Section C assessed students' attitudes with 45 items covering five dimensions (nine items each) evenly distributed: attitude toward learning, social responsibility, tolerance and respect for diversity, ethical values, and personal and social development. Section C consisted of items rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The content validity of the instrument for the relevance of items, clarity and the five dimensions was determined through expert review and internal consistency was assessed with Cronbach's alpha that ranged from 0.85 to 0.91 across the dimensions (Table 1) indicating good to excellent reliability. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study before data collection, assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses and told that they could withdraw at any stage; only students who gave informed consent completed the questionnaire. The completed responses were checked for missing values and entry errors and analyzed in SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviations) were calculated to describe the sample and the five attitude dimensions and reliability analysis was performed for each dimension. The mean scores were interpreted according to the following criterion derived from equal class intervals of the five-point scale: 1.00–1.80 = very low; 1.81–2.60 = low; 2.61–3.40 = moderate; 3.41–4.20 = high; and 4.21–5.00 = very high. The dimensions were then ranked by mean score to identify the domains with the strongest attitudes and those requiring further attention.

Table 1

Structure and Reliability of the Attitude Scale (Section C)

S. No.	Dimension	No. of Items	Cronbach's α
1	Attitude Toward Learning	9	0.87
2	Social Responsibility	9	0.89
3	Tolerance and Respect for Diversity	9	0.85
4	Ethical Values	9	0.88
5	Personal and Social Development	9	0.91
	Total	45	

The five dimensions all surpassed the generally accepted threshold of $\alpha = 0.70$. Internal consistency was highest for personal and social development ($\alpha = 0.91$) and lowest for tolerance and respect for diversity ($\alpha = 0.85$), which is still in good range.

1.5. Results

1.5.1. Sample Characteristics

The sample was composed of 300 undergraduate students from diverse demographic and academic backgrounds. Respondents' mean age was 20.8 years (SD = 1.4) and they had taken an average of 4.2 General Education courses (SD = 1.6). Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents by gender, type of university and academic discipline.

Table 2

Demographic and Academic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 300)

Variable	Category	f	%
Gender	Female	168	56
	Male	132	44
University type	Public	186	62
	Private	114	38
Academic discipline	Social Sciences	96	32
	Business Studies	84	28
	Natural Sciences	75	25
	Engineering	45	15

The sample was slightly female (56%) and mostly enrolled in public universities (62%). All four major discipline groups were represented, with the largest groups being social sciences (32%) and business studies (28%) and the smallest engineering (15%). This variation of gender, institution type, and discipline provides a broad base for describing undergraduate student attitudes. Respondents had taken an average of 4.2 GE courses, indicating a high level of exposure to the General Education component of their programs.

1.5.2. Attitude Dimensions Among Undergraduate Students

Table 3 presents the mean scores, standard deviations, and interpretation level for each of the five attitude dimensions and for overall attitude.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Attitude Dimensions Among Undergraduate Students (N = 300)

S. No.	Dimension of Attitude	Mean	SD	Level
1	Attitude Toward Learning	3.89	0.62	High
2	Social Responsibility	3.76	0.68	High
3	Tolerance and Respect for Diversity	3.82	0.65	High
4	Ethical Values	4.02	0.59	High
5	Personal and Social Development	3.71	0.71	High
	Overall Attitude	3.84	0.58	High

Note. Scores are on a five-point Likert scale from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). Level: 1.00–1.80 = very low; 1.81–2.60 = low; 2.61–3.40 = moderate; 3.41–4.20 = high; 4.21–5.00 = very high.

Interpretation: All five dimensions were in the high range (3.41-4.20) and the total mean for attitude was 3.84 (SD=0.58) indicating that the undergraduate students generally had positive attitudes after taking General Education courses. The mean score for each dimension was higher than the midpoint of the scale (3.00) indicating that students, on average, agreed rather than being neutral or disagreeing on the attitude statements. Standard deviations were between 0.59 and 0.71 reflecting moderate variability of responses. The ethical values of the students were the most homogeneous (SD = 0.59) and the personal and social development was the most heterogeneous (SD = 0.71).

For the first goal, the students' attitude to learning was high (M = 3.89, SD = 0.62). This implies that the majority of the students enjoyed learning, demonstrated interest in academic engagement and were aware of the usefulness of knowledge outside their major subjects. The social attitudes for the

second objective were in high range. Tolerance and respect for diversity (M = 3.82, SD = 0.65) was slightly higher than social responsibility (M = 3.76, SD = 0.68). Thus students reported a positive orientation toward the acceptance of differences and toward their responsibilities to society. The translation of these attitudes into civic commitment seemed somewhat weaker. Regarding the third objective, ethical values, it had the highest mean among all dimensions (M = 4.02, SD = 0.59), whereas personal and social development had the lowest

2. Ranking of Attitude Dimensions

Table 4

Rank Order of Attitude Dimensions by Mean Score

Rank	Dimension of Attitude	Mean	Difference from Overall Mean
1	Ethical Values	4.02	+0.18
2	Attitude Toward Learning	3.89	+0.05
3	Tolerance and Respect for Diversity	3.82	−0.02
4	Social Responsibility	3.76	−0.08
5	Personal and Social Development	3.71	−0.13

The two dimensions above the overall mean of 3.84 were ethical values and attitude to learning. Tolerance and respect for diversity was close to the overall average, but social responsibility and personal and social development were below it. The difference between the largest and smallest dimension was .31 points. The pattern observed suggests that General Education courses are more closely related to students' moral and academic orientations than to their civic engagement and personal growth, although all dimensions were positive. The two least well-performing dimensions reveal the areas in which GE curricula and teaching need the most improvement.

3. Discussion

The current study analyzed the role of General Education courses in developing the attitudes of under-graduate students in Pakistani universities. On all five dimensions students reported positive attitudes, with an overall mean of 3.84 (SD = 0.58). This finding is consistent with the general conclusion of Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) that higher education contributes to students' personal, moral and social development, not just to their intellectual growth. It also corresponds to the spirit of HEC Undergraduate Education Policy 2023 that GE courses should contribute in developing well-rounded and socially responsible graduates.

The mean for ethical values was the highest (M = 4.02, SD = 0.59). Students reported especially positive attitudes toward honesty, integrity, fairness, and responsible behavior. This result might be connected with the position of ethics, Islamic studies and civic education in the GE framework, where moral questions are addressed directly. It may also be a reflection of the high regard for ethical conduct in Pakistani families and communities which GE courses can help to reinforce. This result is consistent with the affective domain of Krathwohl et al. (1964) which has valuing and organization of values as central learning outcomes. The low variation on this dimension (SD = 0.59) indicates that the sample generally showed strong commitment to ethics. However, note that self-reported ethical attitudes may be subject to social desirability and may not necessarily be indicative of ethical behavior.

Attitude toward learning also scored highly (M = 3.89, SD = 0.62). Students generally expressed interest in learning and in academic engagement outside the major subjects. Astin (1993) suggested that involvement in diverse academic experiences enhances students' commitment to

learning and Dewey (1938) argued that learning linked to real life experience maintains motivation. By exposing students to new disciplines and perspectives, GE courses can help foster intellectual curiosity and a disposition toward lifelong learning.

Tolerance and respect for diversity had a mean of 3.82 (SD = 0.65), indicating positive attitudes toward mutual respect, acceptance of differences, and social harmony. This finding is important in Pakistani context where universities gather students of different provinces, languages, sects and socio-economic backgrounds. Nussbaum (1997) claims that courses in the humanities and social sciences foster the ability to comprehend the lives and opinions of others. Diversity learning also was identified as a high-impact practice by Kuh (2008). Such attitudes can be developed through the kind of contact that can be provided by structured discussion and collaborative work across groups in GE classrooms.

The mean value of social responsibility was 3.76 (SD = 0.68). Students' attitudes about their responsibilities to society and their communities were generally positive, but this dimension was lower than the ethical values or tolerance dimensions. One plausible explanation is that GE courses may increase students' awareness of social issues but not their preparedness to act on them. According to Ehrlich (2000), the strongest contribution to classroom learning derives from the connection to community engagement. The GE courses tend to be more lecture and exam focused, and students can learn about civic concepts without getting the hands on experience that makes those concepts a commitment. According to Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior, perceived opportunity and control also influence whether attitudes lead to action.

Personal and social development had the lowest mean score (M = 3.71, SD = 0.71) but was still in the high range. It also had the greatest variation of students. It implies that not all students have equal experiences of opportunities to develop communication skills, self-confidence, interpersonal relationships and personal growth. Chickering and Reisser (1993) defined them as developmental tasks that demand active involvement, feedback, and supportive relationships with teachers and peers. Bandura (1977) also stressed that confidence and social skills are learned through modeling, practice and reinforcement. Many GE courses may have few such opportunities due to large class size, limited student-teacher interaction and assessments that emphasize recall. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle offers a useful way forward for improvement through presentations, group projects, reflective journals and role plays.

The sample consisted of students from public and private universities, four discipline groups and all four provinces. This diversity gives a broad picture of undergraduate students' attitudes. However, the study has certain limitations. The results are drawn from descriptive statistics and self-reported data. The results show that students who took GE courses had positive attitudes, but do not determine whether there are significant differences in attitudes across demographic groups or whether GE courses caused these attitudes. Changes in attitudes over time were not observed, as the design was cross-sectional. Further examination of these relationships using inferential and longitudinal analyzes is needed.

4. Conclusion

The study found that undergraduate students who studied General Education courses had positive attitudes toward all five dimensions with an overall mean of 3.84 on a five-point scale. Ethical values (M = 4.02) and attitude toward learning (M = 3.89) were the strongest dimensions, indicating that GE courses are closely associated with students' moral orientation and engagement with learning.

Tolerance and respect for diversity (M = 3.82) was also high, which is encouraging for social cohesion in a diverse society . Social responsibility (M = 3.76) and personal and social development (M = 3.71) were positive but relatively weaker. Personal and social development was the most variable area among students.

These results suggest that the GE courses have real potential to support students' holistic development in line with the aims of the HEC Undergraduate Education Policy 2023. GE courses are more likely to realize that potential when they move beyond content delivery. GE curricula should intentionally embed practices such as ethical education, collaborative learning, community engagement, reflective practice, and culturally responsive teaching. Future research should use inferential statistics to analyze the relationship between students' attitudes and their exposure to GE courses, compare attitudes across demographic and institutional groups, and use longitudinal or pre-test-post-test design to track changes in attitudes over the course of undergraduate study.

5. Recommendations

The following recommendations are suggested, based on the findings:

- Universities should define clear objectives for attitude development in each General Education course in accordance with the affective outcomes envisaged by the HEC Undergraduate Education Policy 2023 and assess them along with cognitive outcomes.
- Higher education institutions should organize faculty development programs to build teachers' skills in active learning, competency-based and authentic assessment, technology-enhanced interactive learning, and culturally responsive teaching.
- Because social responsibility was among the lower dimensions, GE courses should incorporate service learning, community projects, and field-based assignments that allow students to engage in civic values rather than just talk about them.
- Because the lowest and most varied scores were for personal and social development, GE instruction should include frequent opportunities for presentations, group projects, peer feedback, reflective journals, and mentoring, especially for students who are less active in class.
- Universities should take advantage of ethical values via case studies and real-life dilemmas that relate ethical principles to academic, professional and social decision-making.
- Schools, colleges and universities should develop inclusive and supportive learning environments that foster co-operation across gender, region, language and discipline. It is through daily interaction that tolerance and respect for diversity will be strengthened.
- Student feedback, attitude surveys, classroom observations, and course evaluations are expected to be used by universities to assess the effectiveness of GE courses regularly, and use the results to update teaching strategies and course design.
- The HEC and universities should promote more research, including inferential, comparative and longitudinal studies, to better ascertain how and to what extent GE courses affect students' attitudes.

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