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Conversion of Colleges into Centre of Excellence: Undergraduate English Honours Course in Kerala

Himanshu Tripathi

College of Education, Alagappa University, Tamil Nadu, India

Email: ved.van.ved@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Various measures have been recommended by different committees to improve the access, equity and quality status of higher education in Kerala. One of the major recommendations was initiated in the form of a pilot study with the commencement of honours course in English, Economics, Maths and Commerce subject at undergraduate level. This comparative study is an attempt to study the effectiveness of undergraduate English honours course, which commenced at Women's College, Thiruvananthapuram in 2012. Comparison has been made between the learning outcomes of final year students from BA English (general) and BA English (honours) courses. The sample was tested on similar topics/sub-subjects taught in their course through an achievement test, oral test, extempore, tutorial observation and script play. An open discussion was also conducted with students and teachers to know their insight about the course. Findings of the study show positive impact of the honours course on the achievement of the learner. But, both the groups were found to be at the same platform in communication skill. Lastly, recommendations are made to bring improvement in the newly introduced English honours course to improve its quality in terms of learning outcomes.

1. Introduction

University Education Commission headed by Dr. Sarvapalli Radha Krishnan in 1948 emphasized upon improving the quality of higher education by improving teaching standards, training of teachers and research. Twelfth, five year plan in India continued the similar motive in improving the quality of education and strongly linked to the quality of physical space, textual materials, classroom processes, academic support to the teachers, assessment procedures and community involvement (XIIth five year plan, 2011). We can take 'quality in higher education' in a way of describing, how well the learning opportunities so available help students in achieving their award. It is about making sure that appropriate and effective teaching, support, assessment and learning opportunities are provided to them. This can be measured by satisfaction of students, their academic performance and employability.

Kerala is maintaining literacy rate above 90 percent level and world class social indicators. But it is a big surprise that the state is still topping the unemployment index in the country. The state has somewhere lost its track in the transition phase from school education to higher education. Despite the implementation of 'Kerala Model',

wide inequalities exist in the terms of opportunities for professional education because of location, socio-economic status and the community groups (Salim, 2004). In the study he tried to analyze the level of participation in higher education by various socio-economic groups and identified the entry barriers to higher education. In order to remove the entry barriers and inequality in opportunities, he proposed to adopt a discriminatory approach, based on differences in locality, socio-economic background and community. Access and equity in access to higher education alone could not fulfill the outcome. Quality in education is also an important aspect of today's market conditions. Adequate facilities, availability of regular teachers and the quality of teaching are key factors in the provision of quality higher education. However, the problems faced by colleges in Kerala are underpinned by the broader regulatory environment and by an unwieldy system. The problems in the current regulatory environment are linked to the external socio-economic and political factors, which shape the nature of stakes that political parties or religious or caste associations have in the management or functioning of higher education (Kodoth, 2010). Thus, there is a need of reforms and challenge to fashion an education system, which can provide access, ensure equity and maintain

excellence. There is a need of such reforms in higher education that it matches the highest standards in the world and makes Kerala graduates competitive (Sreenivasan, 2012). Post-independence, India has made a tremendous effort in increasing the number of higher educational institutes and enrollment in them. But, there is no link of quantity and quality in any area, quantity never assures quality. The Perspective Plan 2030 of Kerala, also known as Vision 2030 (Government of Kerala, 2014) has underscored the importance of education in the development of the Kerala economy. Kerala can learn from its own experiences in school education. It is important to learn from other states/countries, but not to necessarily follow them in increasing the number of educational institutes. Kerala tends to blindly follow the same approach as others followed (Tilak, 2015). In an innovative move, Government of Kerala constituted the Kerala State Higher Education Council in 2007. The council has three bodies to render advice to the state government, co-ordinate the roles of government and universities and to evolve new concepts and programmes in higher education. One commission report tried to redefine the role of newly constituted KSHEC. It states that it is imperative to strengthen the reciprocal relationship between the council and other higher education institutions in the state for the fulfillment of certain common objectives and share certain common facilities. At the same time, adequate provisions have to be made in the KSHEC Act for the effective implementation of University Grants Commission/Rashtriya Ucha Siksha Abhiyan schemes in the state. In the report some specific recommendations have been made for the revision of the KSHEC Act in order to improve higher education condition (Gurukkal, 2017). So, researches and opinions reveal the tattered condition of Kerala higher education. Various committees have been set up by the state government in order to bring improvement in its condition. In 2012, a committee headed by Prof. J.A.K. Tareen recommended measures to improve the 'access, equity and quality' of higher education. The Committee proposed that it is in the interest of the State to adopt changes in tune with the national thinking as this would not only facilitate easy recognition by UGC but also entitles institutions to substantial central funding during XIIth Plan. One of the major recommendations is:

"Integrating undergraduate with postgraduate programmes under one roof: There is a need to gradually shift to integrated U.G. & P.G. programmes in all subjects, with a lateral exit after 4 years with Bachelor's Degree (Hons.) or 3 year exit with a Bachelor's Degree. A four-year (Honours.) Degree is not only recognized globally for admission to M.S. & Ph.D. programmes abroad, but will also be a preferred qualification by the employer."

Kerala State Planning Board had recommended to introduce the Degree Honours Programme in four Government colleges on Dec 12, 2012.

- Women's College, Thiruvananthapuram- B.A. Honours in English
- Maharajas College, Ernakulum- B.A. Honours in Economics
- Victoria College, Palakkad- B.Com Honours
- Brennen College, Thalassery- B.Sc. Honours in Mathematics

These are among the top government colleges currently enjoying repute in Kerala. Colleges were chosen for the Honours pilot project, envisaged by the State Planning Board, considering their potential for excellence, from the academic year 2013-14 onwards.

This is a case study to know the effectiveness of undergraduate English honours course with respect to the performance of students and employable opportunity for them in future. Women's College, Thiruvananthapuram was selected for conversion into Centre of Excellence during XIIth plan, with a view to enhance the quality of the degree course and potential for employment. This is a prestigious institution that has to its credit a history of more than 100 years of excellence in the field of women education and is a pioneering institution in the field of higher education. The Government College was started as the Sircar Girl's School, in 1864 by the Royal family of Travancore. In 1920, it was elevated to the status of a first grade college and was renamed as H.H.The Maharaja's College for Women. Today, the College has 22 teaching departments that conduct 16 U.G. courses and 17 P.G. courses. Nine of the departments are identified as research centers by the University of Kerala. The Department of English is running BA English (general) Course and BA (honours) in English Literature and Language with intake of 30 in each. It is a three year semester course and centralized merit is prepared by the University of Kerala based on the marks obtained in higher secondary school. English subject scores attained in higher secondary school are also given due weightage while preparing the merit.

2. Objectives

- To study the effectiveness of the undergraduate English honours course in terms of quality (performance and employment opportunity).
- To know the attitude of students and teachers towards the new course inducted at undergraduate level.
- To know about the problems faced by students and teachers during the course to bring qualitative improvement in future sessions.

3. Hypotheses

H1: There is no significant difference in the achievement scores of students from English general course and English honours course.

H2: There is no significant difference in the communication skills attained with respect to students from English general course and English honours course.

4. Delimitation of the Study

This is a specific course study and it is too early to arrive at any conclusion at this stage. It is better to reach at any conclusion only after the passing out of at least three to four batches. The sample collection from other colleges involved in running other different honours courses would have made this study more relevant and useful. But this could not be done due to shortage of time for data collection. More sample collection from different courses would have given us a comprehensive picture about the effectiveness of the step taken by the state government in 2013.

5. Methodology and Sampling

Total intake for the course is 30 seats. Though, it is unfortunate that till 2015 some seats in the course remain vacant. In 2013-14 only 25 seats and subsequently in 2014-15 only 29 were filled. In 2015-16 it was more than the intake capacity i.e.32. Two extra students were admitted under sports quota. As the initial batch of 2013 passed out in 2016, it is beneficial to conduct the study at this time in order to know the effectiveness of the course. Though, it is too early to arrive at any conclusion at this stage. Still, this study is necessary to analyze the step taken by the Kerala Government to find the gap in quality dimension and fill the dent to make it more effective for future batches. In this case study participants were randomly selected from both the courses. Investigator randomly selected 20 final year students (2015-16) from BA English general course, having English Literature as compulsory subject and 20 final

year students (2015-16) from BA English honours course. Students from both the groups are taught by same teachers. Study was performed between Jan 2016-Aug 2016.

6. Tools

The Sample was tested on similar subjects taught in their course through an achievement test. Test was prepared by the researcher with the help of other researchers of his department. The test has objective as well as subjective questions from the common topic of both the courses. The aim was to check the development of student dimensions viz. understanding, remembering, analysing, applying and creativity on topics taught commonly to both the groups. Standardization of the test was conducted by verifying the reliability and validity of the tool. Experts from the Department of English, Alagappa University, Tamil Nadu and Women's College, Thiruvananthapuram were initially consulted for its construction. The content of the tool was later validated by the experts from both the institutions. Internal reliability was tested by Cronbach Alpha and all statements above 0.70 were selected. Even, it was tested by the Karl Pearson Coefficient. Correlation among various dimensions was found to be significant at .01 level. The correlation matrix among these dimensions is shown below in table 1:

Students were tested orally for communication skills also. They were given opportunity to speak openly in extempore and later even distributed in tutorials for group discussion. Participants were asked to script a play on their own to observe their reaction in real time situation. Lastly an open discussion was conducted with students and teachers to know their insight about the course, constraints they faced and future subsequent steps.

7. Data Collection and Analysis

An achievement test was conducted just prior to their university examination. Students were tested only on common taught topics, but questions were asked in depth. Test consisted of objective as well as subjective questions and

Table 1: Correlation Matrix.

	Understanding	Remembering	Analyzing	Applying	Creativity
Understanding	1.00				
Remembering	.72	1.00			
Analyzing	.79	.72	1.00		
Applying	.62	.62	.79	1.00	
Creativity	.66	.75	.65	.81	1.00

Source: Survey, all correlations are significant at .01 level

was conducted for two hours. The scores obtained by both the groups are given below:

It is clearly evident from the table 2 that scores obtained in the achievement test by the students of honours course are better than students of English general course. Their overall average score in the test is 71.7 percent while students from English general course averagely scored 61.3 percent. More students have scored above 70 percent marks in English honours course. More students are in (51-70) percent category in English general course. There is only one student in the honours course who has scored less than 50 percent.

In both the courses there is common provision of improving the communicative skills in students. Through communication skills teachers try to develop four aspects:

- Equip them for competitive examinations.
- Prepare them to face various International English Language Tests.
- Enhance their career prospects and employability.
- Help them to develop their personality by fine tuning their communication and presentation skills.

Both the groups were tested by the faculty on communication skills in the seminar hall. Each student was tested for five minutes orally which includes extempore and later group discussion for fifteen minutes. Aim was to test on verbal communication (VC) as well as non-verbal communication (NVC). The aim was to know their awareness about basic techniques of conversation, response to various situations, using of language in various contexts/ situations, interview response, public addressing, group discussion, body language, postures, orientation, eye contact, facial expression, self-concept, self-esteem

and aspiration. Proficiency checking in a wide range of language functions such as greeting, thanking, complaining and apologizing was the part of this assessment. Scores so obtained in the test are as follows:

It is clearly evident from the table 3 that scores obtained in the communication skill test by the students of honours course and students of general course are almost similar i.e. 66 and 63 percent respectively. Honours students performed well in all the four activities of communication skill test. This difference is high in non verbal communication and extempore activity. In verbal communication and group discussion this difference is negligible. So, overall we can analyze that the difference in the performance of students with regard to communication skill is very less

8. Hypothesis Testing

H1: There is no significant difference in the achievement scores of students from English general course and English honours course.

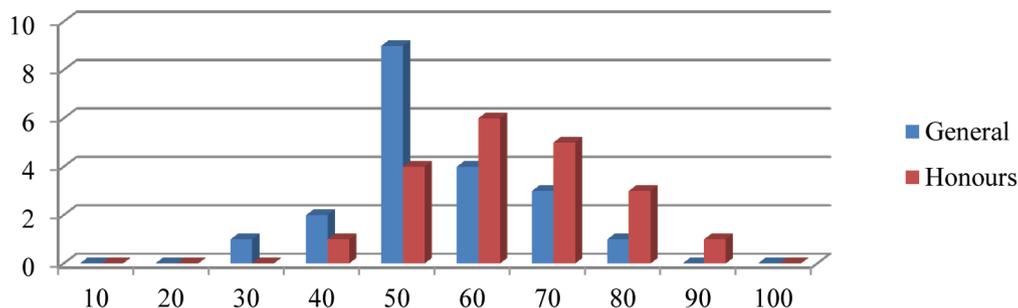
It is evident from the table 4 that for $df = 38$ t-value is 2.85 which is significant at both .01(2.59) and .05(1.96) levels. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected and we can say that there is significant difference in the achievement scores of students from English general course and honours course. Students in honours course are better performers with the average score of 71.7 percent average marks. The difference in performance of both the groups is more than 10 percent.

H2: There is no significant difference in the communication skills attained with respect to students from English general course and English honours course.

Table 2. Achievement Test Scores.

Course	Average Marks	Number of Students	>70% score	(51-70)% score	Up to 50% score
English General	61.3		20	60	20
English Honours	71.7		45	50	5

Source: Survey, Number of students in percent.



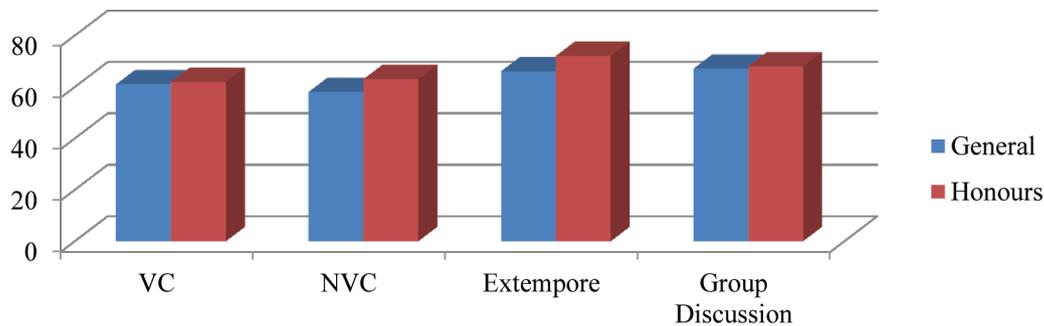
Source: Survey

Figure 1. Achievement Test Score.

Table 3. Communication Skill Scores.

Course/Test	VC*	NVC*	Extempore*	Group Discussion*
English General	61	58	66	67
English (Honours)	62	63	72	68

*Marks in percent



Source: Survey

Figure 2. Communication Skill Scores.

It is evident from the table 5 that for $df = 38$ t-value is 1.90 which is not significant at both .01(2.59) and .05(1.96) levels. Hence, the null hypothesis is accepted and we can say that there is no significant difference in the communication skills in students from English general course and honours course. We can clearly see that the difference between mean of both the groups is very less. This negligible difference is supported by the t-value, indicating no significance difference. We can say that both are found to be on the same platform of performance.

9. Discussion with Teachers and Students

In the end, an open discussion was also conducted. According to honours students it was totally their decision to opt for the course as it will open more doors for their career prospect. Most of them agreed that their parents opposed their view of pursuing the course. But they joined the course as it will help them in developing enough proficiency in the subject, with earnest effort on their part, for their employment/ professional requirements/ foreign studies. After the completion of the

course they can even apply for foreign scholarships to continue for Masters in the subject. Except two, all of them were of the strong determination to continue their study in the same subject at higher level also. On the other hand, majority of students in the general course were of the opinion to merely pass in the examination with a higher percentage of marks. They were even undecided about their future subsequent steps after the completion of the course. During the course, honours students were totally satisfied by the faculty of the college. It even came to limelight that special classes were conducted by the honours faculty on BAHE114- History of English Literature during weekends. They were satisfied with the college library which has Wi-Fi connectivity and more than 25000 books. But most of these books cover Indian literature and famous foreign literatures. They have to rely upon literature summaries available online to cover rest of the foreign literatures. Guides are available in the local market but it could not serve their purpose of gaining depth knowledge about the topic. Teachers have mixed opinion about the course. Most of them were in the support of the course while only a few were against it. Those who were against it were of the opinion that it is a

Table 4. Achievement Test Score.

Course	No. of students	Mean	Standard Deviation	t-value
English General	20	61.3	11.9	2.85*
Honours English	20	71.7	11.09	

*.01 level

Table 5. Communication Skills Score.

Course	No. of students	Mean*	Standard Deviation	t-value
English General	20	63	5.7	1.90**
English (Honours)	20	66.25	5.9	

*in percent ** .05 level

step to create two groups within a group. This step will only develop complexity among them rather sparking their career in English subject. Teachers openly projected the problem of lack of faculty, study material, orientation/training programme, inclusion of only single drama in the course, non-availability of theatre in time to perform drama, insufficient time for the overburdened course, tougher evaluation system etc. They projected the issue of non availability of prescribed books with the college administration which expressed their inability due to strict purchase rules of the University. In some sessions, for some of the classes old classrooms were used. More classrooms are needed as the enrollment figure in the course is also increasing in every session. Teachers projected a major problem to judge the interest and efficiency of the admitted students in English language and Literature through merit indexing during admission. There is a lot of meat in the honours course in comparison to English general course which is a thin soup for easy digestion. The overburdened honors course has to be completed in limited period of three years. To complete vast course in limited time is a great challenge for the faculty. Most interesting fact emerged from the discussion is that students are facing difficulty in securing admission for Masters in Kerala itself. The honours course is far heavier and there are no relatively easy papers like Part-I English and second language in general course. Honours students generally score less than their regular BA counterparts in the final examination. These scores are the basis of preparing common merit for admission in higher education courses. Those of them who cannot go out of Kerala to study are left in the lurch. This can be due to their socio-economic background or less marks attained at graduate level or both. The experience has been the worst in the first (2013-16) batch from which 12(nearly 50 percent) made their way in different Central Universities and reputed institutes but other 13 are left in uncertainty about their future. Those left behind could not even made their way in Kerala itself due to unstructured and dissimilar approach of evaluation.

10. Findings and Conclusion

This paper is a study of undergraduate honours course started as a pilot project by the Kerala Government in order to improve quality in higher education. The paper investigated the effectiveness of the course by performing

a comparative study between students of English general course and honours course. It is found that students of the honours course are better performers than the general course students. In the achievement test conducted, they performed better by 10 percent than English general course students. It is a big surprise that students from both the groups were found to be almost at the same platform of communication skill performance. Though students from honours course performed better than general course students in this skill, but the difference is not significant. Students from both the groups were struggling after sometime in expressing themselves fully in English language. During script play, students from both the groups were using Malayalam language after some time. Students from honours Course were always taking initiative on any topic of discussion without any fear of failure. Their self-concept, self-esteem and aspiration levels were found to be high enough to push them for initiation. Students are admitted in the course based on marks scored at 10+2 level. The basis of admission never reflects the interest of student in the specialized course which has exhaustive syllabus to study. Admission should be based on an entrance test, which should include even an attitude and aptitude test to know their interest in English Language in order to make the course more effective. It is better to find out the talent at the terminal level during admission. Rigorous effort was made in syllabus preparation for the discussed course, but it is too exhaustive and the duration of the course is limited. The time period for the course should be extended to four years and course should be converted into an integrated programme. This will have two benefits, first too exhaustive course can be completed in sufficient time and there is no need to start MA English honours course. This will solve the problem of those who could not make their way in Masters. Literatures of Asia outside the India are neglected. Syllabus should have at least some content about literatures of our neighboring countries also. Being a new course, it is difficult to have ease in accessibility of the books in the market as well as in the college library. Purchase rules should be made flexible enough to purchase necessary study material. Moreover, the requirement that faculty is placing an order with the seller offering the biggest discount must be scrapped till the books are readily available in the market.

More classrooms are needed to run the course smoothly and enrollment is continuously increasing in every session. The examination paper should have objective along with subjective questions. The only drama paper (BAHE163) is a practical paper but it includes only 20 percent for practical assessment. The paper needs to be restructured and more emphasis should be given upon practical part. Unstructured and dissimilar approach of evaluation system provides advantage to students of general course to score more marks in comparison to students of English honours course. This helps them to secure their seat in higher courses where selection is based on marks scored at UG level. To avoid this situation honours students should either be given some weightage in PG admission or have a few MA seats reserved for them in few colleges. These factors will definitely help in achieving the desired level of terminal behavior on the part of the learner. Honours course has made a positive impact on the achievement of the learner and it is clearly visible as more than ten honours students qualified in the entrance examination for pursuing Masters at various Central Universities. But, it will take another two years to bring desired changes in the terminal behavior of students and in achieving the instructional objectives.

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