Among the challenges facing curriculum planners, the most pervasive, complex and important is designing coherent programmes of general education. General education is an important part of the curriculum at every level—pre-school, primary, secondary and tertiary. Unlike specialized training in a discipline or occupation, the design of general education is usually affected by many conflicting influences, is often surrounded by a number of vague concepts, and is not infrequently the subject of public and professional rhetoric. At the same time, general education is usually considered the most important component of the curriculum, carrying the burden of the self-concept and expectations of the society, its basic value assumptions, its social priorities and its image of the future. There are numerous controversies surrounding the form and content of general education—the basics of learning—and this controversy is likely to increase as the expectations of general education are enlarged to include preservation of local culture and language, preparation for rapidly changing and unpredictable employment patterns, and a sensitization to global problems and the interdependence of peoples.

The basic question that must be asked is this: What learning—skill, understanding, value—is so important for the development of the individual and the well-being of the society that all students must be expected to acquire it? What should form the ‘common core’, the ‘basics’ of education? Clearly, this is a question not easily answered and one for which there is no single answer for all time and for all societies. The pursuit of the question, nevertheless, is of continuing interest and the responsibility of many people. Curriculum planners are likely to approach it in this way: How can we develop coherent programmes of general education that are effective and relevant? As a contribution to this continuing discussion, I would like to offer
some reflections on four questions: (a) what do we mean by coherence in a curriculum of general education? (b) what are the major sources of this coherence? (c) what are the challenges which general education programmes are facing at the present time? and (d) what may be the implications of these challenges for general education programmes over the next two decades?

Coherence and curriculum

Curriculum is one of those elusive concepts in educational studies that shifts in meaning depending on who is using it. Sometimes it is used in a narrow sense to mean a syllabus of the content of an academic discipline (the outline of what is to be taught in physics) and sometimes it expands to include almost everything that a learner experiences. Commonly, however, it is taken to mean the plan for learning, as distinct from its implementation, and includes aims, content, strategies of communication, and evaluation. It is important to remember that curriculum is more than a taxonomy of topics and concepts, but includes skills, values and awareness, as well as implicit activities that have come to be called the 'hidden curriculum'. Indeed, it is possible to argue that a curriculum is not a reflection of reality but rather a selection and idealization of reality, an exemplar or what we may call 'myth'.

Nowhere is the mythic quality of curriculum more evident than when we talk about general education. The pattern of skills, values and understandings which purport to address the personal development of every learner and the common good of the society has three dimensions: an idealization of the past, a selection of the present and an image of the future. Both in the selection of content and in the pattern of learning, general education proposes an exemplar of what a mature and educated person should be and what a society wishes to become. This implies that before scientific and technical questions can be asked about general education, there are first philosophical and artistic questions to be posed, questions of meaning, value and image.

If any curriculum is to be a plan for learning, something more than a random or whimsical group of learning experiences imposed on the young, it must have form and coherence. When we refer to coherence in general education, we must distinguish among the different activities to which the term may be applied. First, there is