

Matthew R. Malcolm, 2018

Volume 4 Issue 2, pp. 1311-1319

Date of Publication: 18th September 2018

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.42.13111319>

This paper can be cited as: Malcolm, M. R. (2018). *A New Era for Liberal Arts: Global Changes and Emerging Possibilities*. *PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences*, 4(2), 1311-1319.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

A NEW ERA FOR LIBERAL ARTS: GLOBAL CHANGES AND EMERGING POSSIBILITIES

Matthew R. Malcolm

Universitas Pelita Harapan, Tangerang, Indonesia

matthew.malcolm@uph.edu

Abstract

This article explores the changes and possibilities for liberal arts education in what has been called the 'Asian Century.' The article represents conceptual research, in that it attempts to offer interpretative and speculative commentary on the state of liberal arts at this time, from the perspective of the Dean of a Faculty of Liberal Arts in an Asian University. At the same time, the article draws on empirical research, including recently published research by the author on the nature of liberal arts in South-East Asia.

Following a survey of this and other relevant literature, it is proposed that liberal arts faces certain changes at this point of time, which may present opportunities for reinvigoration of the educational approach. These include: the pressures toward economic or utilitarian motivations for education; the evolving places of science and humanities in a general education curriculum; and the controversial place of religion and theology in liberal arts education.

While each of these issues presents challenges, it is possible to regard this period of contestation as providing an opportunity for this classic educational approach to find fresh relevance.

Keywords

Liberal Arts, Higher Education in Asia, Curricular development, Science, Humanities

1. Global Changes in Liberal Arts

The end of the twentieth century and the opening decades of the twenty-first century have seen significant worldwide changes in liberal arts education. The stronghold of liberal arts education, the US, has seen decline and redefinition, while there has been a resurgence of this style of education in Europe and Asia (Kirby & Van der Wende 2016a). Given these changes, it seems timely to offer an analysis of the significance of these trends. This article will proceed by offering a summary of recent trends, as attested in the literature, and then giving qualitative evaluation of their significance. While drawing on published reports of quantitative and qualitative studies, then, the present article seeks to push further, in order to propose a meta-perspective on the significance of a plethora of recent studies.

1.1 The redefinition of liberal arts education in the US

Liberal arts enrolments in the US and Canada have been declining. It has been said that enrolments in liberal arts programs have decreased by 20% in Canada in recent years (Universities Canada 2016). Discussion regarding higher education in the US frequently notes the concern that the historic breadth of scope in US liberal arts education is no longer relevant for an internationally competitive higher education sector in which students must be prepared for specific professions (Gerber 2012, Logan & Curry 2014). Such concerns are highly contested, with some suggesting that the movement towards increased professionalization results in liberal arts institutions abandoning their historic calling (Baker et al. 2012).

1.2 The resurrection of liberal arts education in Europe

While it is undisputed that liberal arts education arose in Europe, it is today frequently thought of as a quintessentially American approach to education (Fischer 2012), having long since diminished in Europe. However, an important development has been occurring since the 1990s: “liberal arts and sciences education has been (re)emerging in Europe over roughly the last two decades” (Van der Wende 2011). This reemergence shows no sign of abating. As recently as 2018, the University of Nottingham has opened a new liberal arts programme, promising in its opening blog post that this new initiative will enable students to explore what it means to be human (Wilson 2018). In Van der Wende’s estimation, the re-emergence of liberal arts in Europe arises in part as a corrective to this region’s more recent over-specialization in education (Van der Wende 2011).

1.3 The rise of liberal arts education in Asia

The rise of liberal arts education in Asia is a phenomenon for which there is a growing body of literature. Kirby and Van der Wende (2016b) survey the emergence of liberal arts institutions in China, Japan, and India. Jung et al (2016) explore the rise of liberal arts in China, Korea, and Japan. Tan (2017) evaluates the implementation of liberal arts in Singapore. Yusak (2015) explores openness to liberal education in Indonesia, while Malcolm (2017b) focuses on the particular case study of one liberal arts department in Indonesia.

In Hong Kong, a major educational overhaul in 2012 saw numerous institutions move from a British-style three-year degree model to a US-style four-year model, with the aim of incorporating the greater breadth evident in a “liberal arts” approach (Lanford 2016). This compromise between the full breadth of a liberal arts degree and the specialized approach of a traditional British-style bachelor has also been taken up in other parts of Asia, where liberal arts is often seen as a component of a specialized degree, rather than being offered as a degree in its own right. Examples include Universitas Pelita Harapan in Indonesia, Handong Global University in Korea, Fudan University in China, and National Taiwan University.

2. Three Notable Developments

As the prevalence of liberal arts education has been evolving in different parts of the world, numerous variations and developments have become evident. Of these, three notable developments will be commented on here: the trend towards utilitarian motivations, the growing prominence of science, and the re-emerging place of religion and theology in some expressions of liberal arts education.

2.1 Pressures toward utilitarianism

Reflecting on the decline of liberal arts colleges in the US, Haberberger comments that it is “for the most part driven by the perceived necessity for liberal arts colleges to offer vocational education” (Haberberger 2017). It is noted in an account of a survey of Asian liberal arts institutions that despite maintaining the terminology of holistic formation of citizens, many liberal arts institutions justify their existence by pointing to numbers of graduates in jobs (Malcolm 2018). In China there is some suspicion regarding the value of a liberal arts education, as its historically humanistic motivations conflict with utilitarian values frequently assumed in Chinese education (You 2014).

In Europe, too, the pressures for vocational readiness and economic utilitarianism are felt by liberal arts institutions. Kontowski & Kretz (2017) show how some private German liberal

education institutions are attempting to respond to this pressure. They point out that a liberal arts approach to education is inherently ill-disposed to revenue-raising and cost-cutting; yet to survive, compromises are sometimes made. They advocate particular strategies that might help such institutions to learn “how to survive without selling your academic soul” (2017, 129).

2.2 The new prominence of science

The terminology of “liberal arts and sciences” is beginning to replace the historic “liberal arts” in numerous locations. One of the few places that offers liberal arts in Australia (The University of Sydney) markets a bachelor of “liberal arts and science.” Examples in other parts of the globe where this terminology is now standard are Duke Kunshan University in China, and Amsterdam University College in the Netherlands. While science has always had an important place in the liberal arts, it appears that its place is now becoming more prominent, perhaps partly due to the potential miscommunication of the label “liberal arts,” and partly due to the heightened attention currently given to STEM subjects (Godwin & Pickus 2017).

In You Guo Jiang’s discussion of liberal arts in China, it is demonstrated that a focus on the scientific method in some institutions accompanies suspicion regarding efforts to consider the integrated development of whole persons (You 2014). In an evaluation of liberal arts in Asia, Tachikawa urges that “any future liberal arts college must succeed in integrating at advanced levels, the natural sciences and the humanities in a curriculum that aims at ‘humanizing’ science” (Tachikawa 2016, 23).

2.3 The re-emerging place of religion and theology

Jung et al note that “there are strong links between Christianity and the liberal arts institutions in East Asia” (2016, 185). Of the six institutions that are the focus of dedicated case studies in that volume, four were founded with explicitly Christian aims. In a recent study of the views of lecturers at a South-East Asian department of liberal arts, it was found that one strong opinion of lecturers was that liberal arts as an educational approach aims to integrate Christian faith and secular vocation (Malcolm 2017b).

While religion and theology used to have pride of place in liberal education studies in Europe and the US, this is often no longer the case (Kimball 2010). However, the emergence of liberal arts education in Asia has frequently (though not always) involved an emphasis on these subjects. For example, Universitas Pelita Harapan in Indonesia views liberal arts as pursuing “the holistic cultivation of broad-minded, well-rounded citizens, who will flourish in their life and employment” (Malcolm 2017a, 125). It pursues this by enabling students to critically evaluate

their own worldviews, which, it is said, demands the consideration of religious and theological assumptions. The development of theological literacy therefore has a significant place in the liberal arts curriculum, alongside the development of other relevant literacies.

3. Opportunities for Reinvigoration

Each of the developments noted above involves contestation. It seems to this author that each provides a distinctive opportunity for the reinvigoration of liberal arts in the future. Taking the classic formational *telo*i of goodness, beauty, and truth, each of the three developments discussed above is here considered in terms of its potential for the future of educational formation. It is at this point of the present article, then, that we move from an analysis of trends identified by recent studies to the proposal of a meta-perspective on the significance of these trends.

3.1 Utilitarianism and a reinvigorated conception of the good

Schneider (2016) suggests that the utilitarian or economic motivations for liberal arts, which are so often set in opposition to idealistic or ethical motivations for liberal education, may actually find some coherence together. Using the particular liberal educational value of intercultural competence, she points out that all people need intercultural competence, *both* as citizens (thus the ethical motivation) *and* for careers (thus the economic motivation). This provides food for thought: could it be that, while economic motivations for liberal arts are frequently overplayed and vigorously contested, they may have a place as part of a broader conception of formational *good*?

That is, goodness is inclusive of, even if it is not directly focused on, the good that comes to careers, businesses, and national economies. To look at this slightly differently, we could say that the formation of critically-minded ethical citizens might be expected to be *so* good that it inevitably bursts the bounds of individual virtue (though of course, companies and economies might not instantly recognize or experience this good). We might call this “virtuous utilitarianism.” If liberal arts institutions are becoming more highly attuned to this particular dimension, or application, of the *good*, we may see this as providing the potential for a forward step, rather than being only a problem. It may be that such institutions could reconfigure their appeals to utilitarian motivations by situating them in relation to broader conceptions of virtue.

3.2 The place of science and a reinvigorated conception of beauty

Although science has a great historic place in the liberal arts tradition, the renewed prominence of science and technology in some liberal arts curricula might be seen as appealing

to the desire of certain stakeholders for liberal arts to be vocationally directed. Especially in Asian cultures, science and mathematics are overwhelmingly viewed as more professionally useful – especially among the many with lower cultural capital – than arts or humanities (Leung 2001, Hu & Wu 2017). But the renewed prominence of science in titles for liberal arts programs provides an opportunity to reiterate that science is as basic as the humanities for developing ethical citizens, just as the arts may be just as vocationally useful as the sciences (as noted above). Arts and sciences both contribute to utilitarian ends, and both contribute to the beauty of what it means to be human.

If those liberal arts institutions that publicize their emphasis on science are able to present this as a restatement of the historic commitment of liberal arts to a truly beautiful holistic education, this present development may be another forward step. It may become clearer to cultures in which “liberal arts” is an unfamiliar enterprise that it is not an “artsy” avoidance of science, but rather a historically tested well-rounded education.

3.3 The place of theology and reinvigorated examination of truth

Having discussed above the values of goodness and beauty in the well-rounded formation of humans, it must be recognized that these are inescapably theological concepts, as is the concept of truth. This is not to claim that only a religious perspective has a means of grounding the concepts of truth, beauty, and goodness, but rather to say that any pursuit of these liberal educational goals unavoidably employs assumptions that are theological in character: assumptions such as “to be human is good”; “humans should act wisely”; “humans owe a debt to God”; “humans owe no debt to anyone.” It is possible to conduct liberal arts education without examining the theological character of such assumptions and truth claims, but the recent vibrant interest in theological literacy in Asia may be seen as a welcome return to one historically important feature of this mode of education.

4. Conclusion

We appear to be entering a new era for liberal arts, as it undergoes redefinition in the US, resurgence in Europe, and rising prominence in Asia (among other locations). Among the developments that are happening at this time are heavy pressures towards utilitarianism, a fresh prominence for science in curricular content and program labels, and a strong interest in the theological dimension of liberal education in Asia.

These trends have been emerging in published reports arising from qualitative and quantitative studies. But the present article has sought to go beyond a simple analysis of these

trends, to propose a meta-perspective on the significance of these trends. The classic formational *topoi* of goodness, beauty, and truth have been employed in this proposal. It has been suggested that pressures towards utilitarianism present the opportunity for advocates of liberal arts education to situate utility within a broader conception of the *good*. It has been suggested that the renewed prominence of science presents the opportunity for advocates of liberal arts education to “humanize” science as truly *beautiful* rather than merely utilitarian. It has been suggested that the strong interest in the theological dimension of liberal arts education in Asia presents an opportunity to foreground questions of *truth*. While each of the noted trends involves contestation, then, it is possible to see each as providing an opportunity for this classic mode of education to receive new life.

4.1 Limitations of research and scope of future research

As it has been noted, this article has been conceptual and evaluative in approach, drawing on published reports of studies in order to suggest a larger evaluation of the significance of recent trends. The advantage of this approach is that it allows a much bigger picture than is possible with a specific case study. The limitation of this approach is that it remains speculative. However, it also provides a prompt for further, more specific research. Case studies could be undertaken that test some of the elements of this article’s proposals about liberal arts education. For example, liberal arts students could be interviewed to discover whether they evaluate their studies using categories of *utility*, *goodness*, or some combination of these. Similarly, qualitative studies could seek to generate theory about students’ views on the place of science or of theology within liberal arts education. Such studies would enable further refinement of this article’s evaluation of emerging directions in liberal arts education.

References

- Baker, V. L., Baldwin, R. G. & Makker, S. (2012). Where are they now? Revisiting Breneman's study of liberal arts colleges. *Liberal Education*, 98, 48-53.
- Fischer, K. (2012). Bucking cultural norms, Asia tries liberal arts. *Chronicle of Higher Education*.
- Gerber, S. (2012, September 24). How liberal arts colleges are failing America. *The Atlantic Daily*. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/09/how-liberal-arts-colleges-are-failing-america/262711/>

- Godwin, K. A., & Pickus, N. (Eds.) (2017). *Liberal arts & sciences innovation in China: Six recommendations to shape the future: CIHE 8*. Boston College Center for International Higher Education.
- Haberberger, C. (2017) A return to understanding: Making liberal education valuable again. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1342157>
- Hu, A. & Wu, X. (2017). Science or liberal arts? Cultural capital and college major choice in China: Science or liberal arts? *British Journal of Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12342>
- Jung, I., Nishimura, M. & Sasao, T. (Eds.) (2016). *Liberal arts education and colleges in East Asia: possibilities and challenges in the global age*. Singapore: Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0513-8>
- Kimball, B. A. (2010). *The liberal arts tradition: A documentary history*. University Press of America.
- Kirby, W.C. & Van der Wende, M. (Eds.) (2016a). *Experiences in Liberal Arts and Science Education from America, Europe, and Asia: A Dialogue Across Continents*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-94892-5>
- Kirby, W. C. & Van der Wende, M. (2016b). New directions in liberal arts and science education in Asia. *Special Issue of the International Journal of Chinese Education*, 5:1, 1-4.
- Kontowski, D. & Kretz, D. (2017) 7. Liberal education under financial pressure: the case of private German universities. R. Deem & H. Eggins (Eds.), *The University as a Critical Institution?* (pp. 111-133). Rotterdam: SensePublishers.
- Lanford, M. (2016). Perceptions of higher education reform in Hong Kong: a glocalisation perspective. *International Journal of Comparative Education and Development*, 18:3, 184-204, <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCED-04-2016-0007>
- Leung, F. K. (2001). In search of an East Asian identity in mathematics education. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 47:35. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1017936429620>
- Logan, J. & Curry, J. (2014). A liberal arts education: Global trends and challenges. *Christian Higher Education*, 14:1-2, 66-79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2015.973344>
- Malcolm, M. R. (forthcoming 2018). Liberal arts in East Asia. T. O'Donoghue (Ed.), [title TBA]. Queen's University Press.

- Malcolm, M. R. (2017a). The place of theology in liberal arts education. D. Tobing, K. Sudarja & P. H. Wibowo (Eds.), *Pendidikan Liberal Arts Berbasiskan Wawasan Dunia* (pp. 123-134). Tangerang: Universitas Pelita Harapan Press.
- Malcolm, M. R. (2017b). Perspectives of lecturers on liberal arts in Indonesia. *Education Research and Perspectives*, 44, 21-42.
- Schneider, C. G. (2016). Afterword: Toward a global liberal education, in Asia and with the world. I. Jung, M. Nishimura & T. Sasao (Eds.), *Liberal arts education and colleges in East Asia: possibilities and challenges in the global age* (pp. 193-201). Singapore: Springer.
- Tachikawa, A. (2016). Development of liberal arts education and colleges: historical and global perspectives. I. Jung, M. Nishimura & T. Sasao (Eds.), *Liberal arts education and colleges in East Asia: possibilities and challenges in the global age* (pp. 13-25). Singapore: Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0513-8_2
- Tan, C. (2017). Thinking Critically about Liberal Arts Education: Yale-NUS College in Singapore. P. Marber & D. Araya (Eds.), *The evolution of liberal arts in the global age* (pp. 127-140). New York: Routledge.
- Universities Canada (2016). The future of the liberal arts: A global conversation. Online booklet retrieved from: <https://www.univcan.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/liberal-arts-report-2016.pdf>
- Van der Wende, M. (2011). The emergence of liberal arts and sciences education in Europe: A comparative perspective. *Higher Education Policy*, 24, 233-253. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2011.3>
- Wilson, R. (2018). What does it mean to be human? Introducing liberal arts. Blog post retrieved from: <http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/liberalarts/2018/02/02/what-does-it-mean-to-be-human/>
- You, G. J. (2014). *Liberal arts education in a changing society: A new perspective on Chinese higher education*. Leiden: Brill.
- Yusak, N. M. (2015). The liberal arts in Islamic higher education: Problem and prospect in Indonesia. *People: International Journal of Social Sciences*, Special Issue 1.1, 724-736.