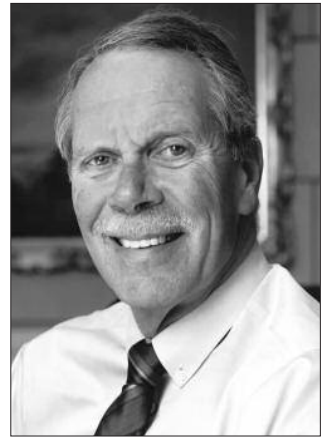


THE ECOLAS MANIFESTO: A VISION FOR EUROPEAN BACHELOR EDUCATION

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The Liberal Arts and Sciences are nothing new to European education. With origins in the Greco-Roman tradition and its evolution throughout the Medieval and Renaissance periods up through its modern manifestations, the Liberal Arts (LA) have continued to focus on the cultivation of young minds through developing a passion and the skills for life-long learning. By concentrating on habits of thought and diverse modes of learning, on the importance of critical thinking and multi-disciplinarity, on assuming responsibility for one's thoughts and their articulation, and on understanding nature through the critical examination of all things, the Liberal Arts have been able to maintain the distinction between "training" and "education".

Ironically, however, LA in the 21st century finds itself constantly on the defensive in Europe, where the university model that has emerged forces students into years of mono-disciplinary training that primarily involves the simple transfer of knowledge from professor to student in the impersonal pedagogical structure of lecture/exam. This is a model which does little to engage students in the material or inspire them to learn beyond the lecture notes. The fact that, for many disciplines, the knowledge transferred will be mostly obsolete within ten years of their graduation does not seem to deter the persistence of this model. Hence, at a time when the benefits and accomplished aims of a liberal arts and sciences education are most necessary and appropriate to meet the challenges of our age, it remains very much in the background.

ECOLAS, the European Consortium for Liberal Arts and Sciences, follows in the footsteps of the "Bologna Process", whose basic premise is to provide a framework for university renewal within the European Higher Education Area. That renewal is meant to prepare and enable students of higher education to learn the skills and attitudes necessary to meet the contemporary and future needs and challenges of the 21st century. With the recognition of the Bachelor or B.A. cycle as a distinct entity leading either to further study or to employability, since its founding in 2007, ECOLAS has worked to advance the Liberal Arts as an effective means to address those challenges. Within certain areas – most notably the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and, to some extent, Germany – discussion of undergraduate education has led to the creation of LA centres of learning. For the most part, their objectives aim to establish a comprehensive Bachelor's degree that prepares students for continued study and/or professional careers within a learning environment radically different from the current European university structure.

While Bologna provides a framework for renewal there are also cultural, economic, political and social trends that contribute to the need for a serious re-evaluation of university educational practices in light of what is necessary to adequately prepare those whose task

it will be to address and resolve the manifest challenges of the 21st century. Climate change, genetic engineering, the consequences of globalisation, the allocation of diminishing natural resources are all issues, among many, that share certain characteristics and lend themselves and their resolution to new ways of thinking. These are long-term challenges for which much of the knowledge required in addressing them has yet to be produced. The student who is not inspired to life-long learning and who does not understand the relationships among various realms of study, who has not learned to work in collaboration and to think critically and creatively will be ill-equipped to produce new knowledge in any meaningful way. For such a task the rote transfer of current knowledge from professor to student within the framework of a narrow disciplinary organisation is wholly inadequate.

ECOLAS has recently issued a brief manifesto that speaks directly to the crisis in European higher education and suggests an appropriate path towards making it more relevant for current circumstances. The ECOLAS *Manifesto* summarizes the need for university renewal in the following terms:

“The consequence of the 20th century effort to democratise access to the university has led to mass-scale and narrow subject-focused undergraduate (Bachelor) education. The demands posed by the challenges of the 21st century clearly require a different approach and the COVID 19 pandemic has only increased the need for problem-solving skills, creative and collaborative thinking, and cross-disciplinary approaches to serious issues. We must ask: does our current undergraduate education respond adequately to the contemporary needs of societies threatened by economic, environmental and political challenges?; will it provide the skills and attitudes that ensure the strengthening of democratic values in the EU? The answer to such questions must be an emphatic ‘No’.”

The *Manifesto* goes on to list a series of characteristics that help to define the kind of education that, in contrast to the mass-scale, narrow-discipline studies of the current model, would allow students to realise fully their capabilities and prepare them to engage the issues that will determine their futures. Such an education can be defined as one that:

- “Allows students to direct themselves gradually toward their main interests;
- Offers them the means and opportunities to solve problems creatively, collaboratively, and from multiple disciplinary perspectives;
- Teaches them to communicate their findings clearly and persuasively;
- Highlights the ethical dimensions in every study discipline;
- Provides students with the tools to turn theory into practice;
- Engages them directly in the task of sustaining democracy;
- Helps them to acquire the soft intellectual and personal skills that business and industry require to meet professional challenges;
- Prepares young people for future academic and professional careers fortified with moral responsibility.”

Finally, the *Manifesto* points to the success of those LA undergraduate programmes, “heirs to the traditional European *Artes Liberales*”, that have recently emerged in Europe and which “offer thoughtful ways to renew undergraduate learning”. That renewal includes “the discovery and fostering of innovative pedagogical approaches, including the latest technologies ... (to) ... produce the skills and attitudes that business, industry and society-

at-large will need in order to defend its democratic values...”. This is a bold claim and if it is to be taken seriously we will need to examine further the essence of the Liberal Arts in order to confirm it.

Creating a Framework for Liberal Arts and Sciences

Definitions of what constitutes a Liberal Arts and Sciences education abound yet by its very nature it defies rigid definition because, rather than being a *system* of education, a true liberal arts programme introduces an ongoing *process* of education that instills modes of thinking, attitudes toward learning and ways of viewing the world that can evolve over the course of a lifetime. Therefore, it is a disservice to LA when attempts are made to prescribe to it a specific, non-transferable format rather than to examine the multiple ways that its characteristics can be integrated into any educational setting where there is the will to emphasise good teaching, an effort to help students realise their full intellectual and personal potential and to provide the preparation of the skills and attitudes in students that will, in fact, be helpful to them in navigating the world in which they will live and work. These essential characteristics include the following:

- A curriculum that offers a broad learning perspective embracing the humanities as well as the social and physical sciences and which, at the same time, demands the acquisition of deep knowledge in one or more areas of academic interest to the student.
- Learning outcomes that demonstrate a commitment, not to the regurgitation of lecture notes but to highly developed cognitive skills including problem-solving, independent critical thought, the ability to work individually and collaboratively, oral and written communication skills
- Emphasis on the importance of citizenship and its responsibilities within a democratic society
- The cultivation of the skills, knowledge and passion for lifelong learning.

How might these characteristics be best implemented within the Bachelor level? Rather than having to choose a strict disciplinary path at the outset, LA students are encouraged to explore a range of subjects within the humanities and the social and physical sciences at the same time that they begin to focus on a single discipline of interest. Ideally, this exploration will provide the student with a sense of the relationships that can be forged among disciplines and the ways in which the humanities and the sciences inform each other. The student should have a fair amount of flexibility in choosing courses that demonstrate various modes of thought, methodologies or approaches to learning; for example, how do scientists think differently than humanists, how do quantitative resources contribute to problem solving, what kind of information needs to be gathered in order to ensure effective problem solving? It is also at this stage where the emphasis in learning focuses more on the so-called “soft” skills of critical thinking, oral and written communication, working together and individually. With regard to in-depth learning, the very skills introduced in the explorative phase need to be nurtured and applied. This is

The study of literature, as I define it, is not a panacea; it is not a cure; it does not solve social problems. What it does is to base education on the sense of a participating community which is constantly in process and constantly engaged in criticizing its own assumptions and clarifying the vision of what it might and could be. The teaching of literature in that sense, and in that context, seems to me to be one of the central activities of all teachers and educators in their continuous fight for the sanity of mankind.

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often accomplished in contemporary “concentration” or “major” structures by organising courses around issue or problem-based orientations based on more than one field of study, providing for students a cross-disciplinary background for their major area of interest.

Learning Environment for the Promotion of LA Skills

Contemporary LA programmes, while providing modern modes of knowledge acquisition, also hark back to their ancient greco-roman roots in their emphasis on the value of inter-personal contact and on-going *conversation* between teacher and student and among students themselves. In this regard the *Manifesto* cautions us about the introduction of new technologies that seek to replace in-person learning:

We should be wary of claims that promote online learning as a panacea. Indications are that it is clearly of limited utility and serves . . . (primarily) as a supplement to the kind of education that will allow students to attain the intellectual agility, flexibility and critical thinking necessary for the 21st century.”

The typical LA learning environment is generally characterised by intensive interaction both in and outside the classroom. Class discussions guided by the professor or led by students, projects that develop outside the classroom, small group collaboration and research and frequent exercises in oral and written presentation are among the pedagogical tools that enable students to acquire and to apply the skills that are the aim of an LA education. They also tend to create the enthusiasm in students to pursue learning beyond the classroom and to instill a love of learning that they can carry with them beyond their formal education.

An often overlooked but vital tool in fostering the expression of student learning is the opportunity to provide opportunities for student research in their chosen field. The teaching of research methodologies, the mentoring of students engaged in research and the assessment of student research efforts become among the important responsibilities of teaching undergraduate students.

Engaged Citizenship

Preparation for engaged citizenship is perhaps the least understood aspect of the liberal arts but may be the most significant in terms of overall impact. At the same time that it refines individual skills it also claims that its methods, aims and outcomes help to prepare students to become positive actors within a community dedicated to the preservation of democratic ideals. This notion is certainly not new to the liberal arts. Once again it has its origins in the ancient world in which the *Trivium* and the *Quadrivium* were thought to provide the skills and knowledge necessary to assume community responsibility. In the contemporary context it is co-curricular activity aimed at the practical application of learned skills that help to offer the experiences that will provide students with the tools for active citizenship. Participation in student organizations, study abroad, community service, internships, volunteer work, work-study programmes and related opportunities all contribute to helping students learn the importance of civic engagement. This is what is meant when defenders of LA speak of educating “the whole person.” It is the blending of these curricular and co-curricular activities that ultimately define the overall fabric of a liberal arts education and distinguish its graduates.

Teaching: The Critical Element

The *Manifesto* makes direct reference to the most important factors that make this kind of learning possible when it states that “(S)tudents of the liberal arts and sciences are

guided by committed teacher-scholars, work in proximity to their peers, and focus on issue-oriented, multi-disciplinary curricula that cut across the boundaries of the humanities, social and life sciences.” Not to be lost in this summary is the crucial element of the teacher-scholar who serves as *guide* to this process.

Teaching in an LA environment requires a whole different commitment from what is ordinarily associated with teaching in higher education. First and foremost it demands a strong belief in its principles and a willingness to work towards excellence in teaching as an essential element of one’s professional development. Yet, at the same time, essential to good teaching is a serious dedication to research and ongoing scholarly activity. Maintaining the balance between teaching and research is critical to ensuring the success of an LA curriculum. It is this that allows faculty to demonstrate the same characteristics of curiosity and dedication to life-long learning that they are charged with instilling in their students.

The main teaching challenge for the LA faculty member is learning how to create and sustain an interactive classroom environment that will engage students in such a way as to develop important cognitive skills while acquiring mastery of course content. Rather than a series of lectures that students absorb (or not) passively, the LA classroom is constantly in motion: lively discussion, oral presentations, group projects, talks from visiting experts, in sum, active give and take in which the instructor serves more as guide than guru. The classroom becomes a place for discovery where faculty and students work to articulate and test those discoveries together. While traditional lectures can remain an occasional part of the classroom, the faculty role in leading discussion, overseeing small-group work, effectively evaluating students on an on-going basis and developing the kind of student-faculty relationship that inspires confidence are among the necessary skills of the LA instructor. Outside the classroom, teaching should become a subject for discussion among faculty members who, by sharing their successes and failures, aim to improve classroom performance. Most faculty in LA programmes find their work both challenging and exhilarating. While as teachers they are guiding their students toward the realisation of their full intellectual and personal potential, they are, at the same time, “learners” as well, inspired to innovate and discover their own professional potential.

The Call

The ECOLAS *Manifesto* is first and foremost a call for change and appeals to European educators and policy makers to consider the liberal arts as a viable approach toward learning at the formative Bachelor stage of university study:

“European higher education finds itself at a critical crossroads. It is our intention to encourage educators and policy makers to find the ways and the means to make this kind of contemporary undergraduate education more widely accessible to all...we invite all those who value education as the engine of democracy to join us in this effort.”

When proponents of LA learning are asked to explain whether it will prepare a student for the workplace or what is its “utility” for the 21st century student it is not difficult to make the case given the complexities of today’s markets. Yet, while “training” may provide one with the necessary skill for entering the workplace, it is “education” of the kind provided by the Liberal Arts that is likely to offer the opportunities for advancement. Perhaps the question “What can I do with a liberal arts degree?” is the wrong question to pose. It would be better to ask “What kind of education will enrich my life over time and allow me to grow to my full human potential?” That is the question for which LA has all the answers.