

# LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES AFTER BOLOGNA – WHAT’S NEXT?

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One of the most notable recent developments in European higher education is the emergence of the liberal arts and sciences movement. In the past 30 years, over 100 programs identifying with this educational philosophy have been created all over Europe, including significant numbers of programs in the Netherlands, the UK and Central Europe. The Bologna Process, an effort by European countries to harmonise and improve higher education across the continent, played an important part in this development. In particular, it was the division of education into an undergraduate/Bachelor and a graduate/Master phase that created an impetus for rethinking the role of the first cycle of higher education. This opportunity was seized on by educational innovators to remedy certain perceived shortcomings in how university education was organized in Europe.

Traditionally, most higher education in Europe has been organized around mono-disciplinary programs, such as law, economics or medicine, that are primarily aimed at preparing students for particular professional careers. These programs typically employ traditional pedagogies, such as lectures and closed-book exams that ask students to reproduce material they have studied. The relationship between teachers and students is fairly transactional and education is seen as a formal process of following courses, doing assessments and receiving credits for those assessments until all requirements have been met and a degree is issued. In stark contrast to this, liberal arts and sciences programs offer students a much more diverse curriculum, combining a broad general education in a range of subjects (usually involving a core curriculum of required courses) with more specialized study in a range of related disciplines, which students are often given considerable freedom of choice in which courses to take. Moreover, these programs stress holistic development, the cultivation of generic intellectual skills and intrinsic academic motivation over narrow professional preparation. They offer active, student-centred pedagogies, with small classes, tutorials and individual supervisions, and see education in much more relational terms, trying to create an academic community of learners who not only study together but also engage outside of the classroom in a social and extra-curricular context, sometimes living together on a residential campus.

However, with the completion of the most visible reform of the Bologna Process, the impetus for further reform has waned, and, perhaps as a result, the growth in the number of liberal arts and sciences programs has slowed. This raises the question of how the liberal arts and sciences movement will continue to develop, and what its future place in the European higher education system will be. Was it a movement that was bound up with

particular circumstances that facilitated its growth and which is doomed to stagnation now that those circumstances no longer obtain? Or will liberal arts and sciences programs continue to exert an influence over the future of university education in Europe?

This is a timely issue to consider, as the Corona pandemic sees higher education standing on the cusp of another transformative moment. The experience of conducting higher education online for two years has upended traditional ways of providing education and forced educators to innovate in several respects. As the world emerges from the pandemic, it seems highly unlikely that everything will return to business as usual. As programs return to in-person teaching, they must decide which innovations they will continue to use, and which aspects of their pre-pandemic educational model they will seek to reinstate. This may provide another occasion to rethink higher education, which could create new opportunities for the liberal arts and sciences movement.

To address these issues and speculate about what is next for the liberal arts and sciences movement, it is important to understand the relationship between the movement's emergence and the context of the Bologna reforms. Once we understand the factors that explain the success of this movement, it will be possible to ask how those factors have changed over recent years, and what these changes mean for the future of liberal arts and sciences in Europe.

### **Liberal Arts and Sciences & the Bologna Process**

As a rough and rudimentary theory of innovation in higher education, one might say that educational innovations happen when three factors are present. Firstly, there has to be an opportunity for reform, some willingness to rethink what higher education is and should be, and some possibility of creating new programs or implementing innovations. Secondly, there must be the recognition that the system faces problems or challenges that need to be addressed. After all, if everything were perfect, no institution would contemplate reforms. Thirdly, there must be proposed educational innovations that plausibly claim they can address those challenges, and which can be advocated for on those grounds.

The emergence of liberal arts and sciences in Europe can be explained in this way. The Bologna Process, which started in 1999 and aimed to harmonize higher education in Europe to make exchange, cooperation and recognition of degrees easier, forced universities across the continent to create undergraduate programs as the first cycle of higher education. The idea was that this would make it easier for students to complete their undergraduate studies at one university and then do their graduate studies elsewhere or to work in another European country. As most European higher education systems did not have a separate undergraduate phase, they had to consider how to implement one. Educators had to think about what this first cycle should focus on. Should it simply reproduce the first years of existing programs? Or should it be a distinctive phase, with its own goals and methods? It is important to stress that most institutions simply divided their existing programs into two, the first three years being redesignated the undergraduate phase and the final year renamed the Master's program, without doing much educational innovation at all. However, the process did create an opportunity for doing things differently, even if only some programs seized it. Something had to change, and some innovators made use of the opportunity to change more than others.

At the time, there were various concerns about the status of higher education in Europe. Four concerns seem to have been particularly important in the development of liberal arts and sciences. Firstly, there was a concern that discipline-based programs did

not do justice to the increasingly important role played by interdisciplinarity, both in science and society at large. More and more, there was a recognition that the most complex and difficult problems students would face in their working lives were not solvable with the insights and methods of a single discipline. Higher education should prepare them for that reality. Moreover, narrow disciplinary programs were unlikely to meet students' interests as they developed during their education, resulting in high student dropout. Secondly, there was a concern that much higher education used antiquated methods that were pedagogically ineffective and alienated students. As a result, students often were not particularly engaged with their education, did not optimally develop their cognitive faculties, and took a long time to finish their degrees. Thirdly, there was a concern that higher education conceived solely as preparation for students' economic future was impoverished. Socialization, civic engagement and personal development were also seen as important functions of higher education, and they needed to be nurtured as much as academic competencies. This was especially relevant to Central and Eastern European societies, whose recent history of communism underlined the importance of civic education. Fourthly, there was a concern, particularly in the Netherlands, that the massification of traditional higher education had resulted in an educational environment that was insufficiently challenging to the most gifted students, and that large-scale, impersonal teaching catered to the lowest common denominator. As such, the system was insufficiently differentiated for students of different ability and levels of ambition.

In the context of these concerns, it is easy to see how the liberal arts and sciences model might offer an attractive way of conceptualizing the Bachelor phase as part of the Bologna reform process. The liberal arts and sciences curriculum, combining multiple disciplines, would encourage interdisciplinary thinking, while its active pedagogy, with emphasis on small-scale, student-centred forms of education, would be much more engaging to students, stimulating their learning and improving their results. The focus on community and students not only studying, but also socializing together would ensure an education concerned with more than just economic and professional goals. All these factors together would result in a more intensive experience that would challenge even the brightest and most motivated students.

Hence it is no surprise that, in the wake of the Bologna reforms, universities all over Europe decided to create new undergraduate programs that embodied the liberal arts and sciences philosophy. There are currently over 100 programs in Europe that, in their own way, follow this model, with over 20 programs in the UK, more than 10 in the Netherlands, and a string of programs in Central Europe. These programs have achieved, in many cases, a considerable degree of prominence in terms of the achievements of their students and the quality of their teaching.

### **Liberal Arts and Sciences after Bologna**

While the spread of liberal arts and sciences within European higher education is indeed notable, one should not exaggerate matters. Throughout Europe, less than 1% of students study at such a program, many European nations have no such programs, and, even in the Netherlands and the UK, students in liberal arts and sciences programs must still frequently explain what exactly they are studying. The Bologna process did not result in the wholesale reconceptualization of undergraduate education in Europe. Moreover, while there was a period between 2005 and 2015 in which many new liberal arts and sciences programs were started, recent years have seen a marked decline in the number of new

programs. And there seem to be few new programs in the pipeline. Hence it seems that the development of liberal arts in Europe has reached a plateau.

This might be explained by the fact that the opportunity that the Bologna reforms presented has passed. The creation of the Bachelor/Master system is largely complete. While it is, of course, still possible to establish new programs and reform old ones, there is less impetus for change, let alone the kind of systemic reimagining that inspires radical change. Moreover, the four problems that spurred the development of liberal arts and sciences no longer support the case for this educational model in quite the same way.

Firstly, while the case for interdisciplinarity is generally accepted, alternative educational programs have arisen that also cater to this need, sometimes inspired by the success of liberal arts and sciences. These include Global Studies, variations on the Politics, Philosophy and Economics concept (such as Politics, Psychology, Law and Economics or Politics, Philosophy, History and Economics), general natural sciences programs, and other programs that combine disciplines without juxtaposing breadth and depth with freedom of choice in the way liberal arts and sciences does. Moreover, existing disciplinary programs are increasingly adding auxiliary disciplines to their curriculum, allowing, for example, law students to also take a few economics courses. In short, it has become clear that liberal arts and sciences are hardly the only way of offering interdisciplinary education.

Secondly, active student-centred pedagogies have increasingly been implemented in other programs. In some universities, traditional lectures have been replaced by, or supplemented with, tutorials or seminars, and more group work, presentations and essay assignments have been introduced. While there is still a lot of traditional education going on in Europe, liberal arts and sciences also hardly have a monopoly on engaging pedagogies. It has become clear that student-centred pedagogies can also function in the context of traditional programs.

Thirdly, the idea that higher education should include a civic dimension is no longer as popular as it once was. In Central and Eastern Europe, where this civic rationale for liberal arts and sciences was perhaps the most important, the moment for rethinking higher education in the light of the communist past is over, and it has not been generally accepted that civic education should be a central part of university study or that liberal arts and sciences are the way of implementing this. If anything, the idea that civic education is important was already waning as the Bologna process got underway, and this rationale for change was never particularly important in other parts of Europe. While some have argued that current social challenges, such as the influence of fake news, low democratic participation or the rise of authoritarianism, might be met through higher education, this idea has not yet gained much traction within higher education or engendered much innovation.

Finally, in those countries in which vertical differentiation and the creation of a more challenging kind of education for the most gifted students were important rationales for the development of liberal arts and sciences, the discourse has shifted towards an emphasis on accessibility and student mental health. Whereas 20 years ago, the concern was that students were not working hard enough and that there should be a focus on stimulating excellence, currently the emphasis lies on ensuring all students have equal access to education and are not overburdened by their studies. In this context, creating more challenging and selective programs, as liberal arts and sciences programs are sometimes understood, is not likely to be well-received.

In short, the times have changed, and the conditions that fostered the rise of liberal arts and sciences programs after the start of the Bologna reforms no longer obtain. This

raises the question of how the liberal arts and sciences movement will continue in the near future. Was it 'flavour of the month' whose time has come and gone, or does it still have relevance in a changed context?

### **The future of Liberal Arts and Sciences: Three scenarios**

In thinking about what is next for the liberal arts and sciences movement in Europe, three general scenarios can be imagined. Firstly, the existing programs might continue, but as niche operations in higher education, without much further growth or influence on the higher education landscape as a whole. Liberal arts and sciences programs would enrol a relatively constant number of students and cater to those who are attracted to their features. But they would occupy one among many different niches in the higher education system, and not be beacons of the future or particularly prestigious. One might say that the liberal arts and sciences were the future once, and they have earned their place in the higher education system, but there are now new new ideas.

Secondly, there could be slow but steady growth in the number of programs, with new programs opening in places where liberal arts and sciences are currently unknown. After all, good ideas spread slowly. As the existing liberal arts and sciences programs continue to teach their students well, with graduates going on to other universities and entering the labour market, they might demonstrate their value to those who are not familiar with them. This might convince universities that do not have such programs to create them, including in Northern and Southern Europe. While the development of liberal arts and sciences education might have slowed down, it has not come to a standstill, and the model will continue to make inroads in the education system, perhaps acquiring a significant degree of prestige and continuing to provide direction for higher education reform.

Lastly, it may be that few new programs emerge, but ideas from the liberal arts and sciences might permeate the higher education system at large, resulting in the reform of existing programs or the shaping of new programs even if they do not explicitly follow the liberal arts and sciences model. One might imagine the inclusion of core and general education courses and student-centred pedagogies in traditional programs, more emphasis on academic community, the creation of physical spaces that foster extra-curricular activities, and a relational approach to education. Universities might also create complementary studies programs that offer students in traditional, disciplinary programs the opportunity to explore interdisciplinary issues in a small-scale setting that stimulates in-depth engagement. Moreover, new educational models that come along might still draw on the essentials of the liberal arts and sciences model – for example, in the structure of their curriculum, their approach to teaching and assessment, and their educational environment.

### **Conclusion: Corona as the new Bologna?**

Which one of these three scenarios will materialize is hard to determine. But perhaps the Corona pandemic can provide a new opportunity for reform in higher education that might

Departmental structure has outlived the rapid increase of information and knowledge, as well as other fundamental changes in what we know and how we look at the world. This has happened because the departmental structure of today's research universities is largely an artifact of branches of knowledge that seemed distinct at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century but have remained distinct only for reasons of academic and administrative convenience.

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shape the future development of the liberal arts and sciences movement like the Bologna process once did. The pandemic has disrupted higher education and forced programs to adapt every aspect of the education they offer. As the acute phase of the crisis wanes, educators need to reconsider how to re-establish their educational practice, and it seems unlikely that everything will return to how it once was. This creates a context for innovation.

The experience of the pandemic has also made clear what the most urgent areas of innovation are. Some changes that were made to accommodate the unfortunate circumstances might be worth keeping. For example, many educators might conclude that innovations in assessment that enabled students to do exams while retaining access to educational materials might better test students' learning. And many students have taken the opportunity to take courses in other programs, or even in other countries, as this suddenly became much easier in a world of virtual education. These are features programs might want to develop going forward. On the other hand, the experience of online teaching has made the higher education community realize how essential certain pre-pandemic features of an educational system are and seek to emphasize them in the future. For example, students' longing to return to in-class activities demonstrates how much they value these. Hence, the pandemic might provide both an opportunity for reform and direction for that reform.

The liberal arts movement has much to contribute in this context. The pandemic has made many students realize how important the relational aspects of higher education are, and how valuable student-centred pedagogies are for learning. While some educators might conclude that online education based on pre-recorded lectures and digital assessments might work fine, students and policymakers have been very clear that the way higher education is delivered during the pandemic is sub-optimal and have made an outspoken call for in-person education. Moreover, the complexity of the pandemic and the way different academic disciplines are involved in the response to it underline the case for interdisciplinary education. The liberal arts and sciences model offers a way of implementing this and a clear demonstration that an alternative model of education is possible. And, the pandemic aside, it seems unlikely that a movement that has been so energetic and has achieved significant educational impact in a short time will simply fizzle out. Good ideas never entirely go away, and good work eventually gets noticed. With more and more alumni from liberal arts and sciences programs going into graduate education and the labour market all over Europe, more universities are bound to think that the liberal arts and sciences movement is on to something.

But one should not expect the pandemic to lead to the creation of many new liberal arts and sciences programmes in the next few years. As discussed above, the educational climate has undeniably changed. Moreover, fully-fledged liberal arts and sciences programs are expensive to run, and the model of a residential, stand-alone program might not offer the flexibility that many students have grown to value during the pandemic. This means that the long-term influence of the movement is likely to manifest itself through innovations in other programs, partly in response to the pandemic. Spurred on by the lessons learnt and the realization of what truly matters in education, one might imagine more programs offering interdisciplinary curricula, more small-group teaching and a greater emphasis on academic community. The existing liberal arts and sciences programs would function as beacons of an educational philosophy that will inspire and shape the future trajectory of higher education, with new programs adopting certain features as they see fit. In short, the liberal arts and sciences programs should become thought leaders and ambassadors of educational innovation, seeking to influence the wider higher education system in a gradual, rather than a wholesale, way.

This potential future trajectory might advance the liberal arts model at the expense of existing liberal arts and sciences programs. The success of these programs has demonstrated the value of a liberal arts and sciences approach, which could lead to other programs adopting similar methods. While this is, in many ways, a good thing for higher education, it also might mean that liberal arts and sciences programs will become victims of their own success. The more other programs incorporate features associated with the liberal arts and sciences model, the less reason there is for the creation of additional liberal arts and sciences programs or even for the existence of current programs. Should the higher education system become more like liberal arts and sciences programs, these programs would become less distinctive, and hence less attractive. But such is the fate of all successful teachers. They provide their students with knowledge and insights. However, as students make these their own, they always make something different of it, adapting it to their own needs and to the requirements of the times. So too, the lessons the liberal arts and sciences have to offer higher education will be transformed in their application. That might make some early innovators nostalgic, but it is the only true mark of success.

When you hear someone extol the benefits of a liberal education, you will probably hear him or her say that “it teaches you how to think.” I’m sure that’s true. But for me, the central virtue of a liberal education is that it teaches you how to write, and writing makes you think. Whatever you do in life, the ability to write clearly, clearly, and reasonably quickly will prove to be an invaluable skill.

Being forced to write clearly means, first, you have to think clearly. I began to recognize that the two processes are inextricably intertwined. In what is probably an apocryphal story, when the columnist Walter Lippmann was once asked his views on a particular topic, he is said to have replied, “I don’t know what I think on that one. I haven’t written about it yet.”

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Keď niekto vychvaľuje prednosti liberálneho vzdelávania, asi povie, že „vás to naučí, ako myslieť“. Nepochybne je to pravda. Pre mňa je však kľúčovou prednosťou liberálneho vzdelávania to, že vás naučí dobre písať a písanie vyjasní vaše myslenie. Nech robíte v živote čokoľvek, schopnosť písať jasne, precízne a relatívne rýchlo sa prejaví ako neoceniteľná zručnosť.

Byť nútený jasne písať znamená v prvom rade to, že musíte jasne myslieť. Začal som spoznávať, že tieto dva procesy sú neoddeliteľne prepletené. Pravdepodobne je to vymyslená historka, ale vraj keď sa novinára Waltera Lippmanna raz spýtali na názor na určitú tému, odpovedal: „Neviem, čo si o tom mám myslieť. Ešte som o tom nič nenapísal.“

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