

A liberal arts degree is worth much more than realised

That liberal arts students have no concern for the real world is a weak claim

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‘Liberal arts enable students to comprehend those things that quite literally make us human’ | Photo Credit: Getty Images/iStockphoto

We are all too familiar with the recession of 2008 and its subsequent impact on the decline of the humanities and more generally, the liberal arts, in North America and Europe. In the context of the ‘existential crisis’ facing classic liberal arts programmes, questions have often centred on their relevance and whether they offer tangible ‘real-world’ skills, resulting in a diverse range of outstanding career outcomes. [An article in *The*](#)

New Yorker, The end of the English major, published in 2023 argued that traditional liberal arts study has become the 'quaint province of a privileged elite, comprising students who do not expect a return on their investment and can afford to spend time on unremunerative pursuits'.

The 'getting a job' concern

As a result, liberal arts degrees face increasing criticism in policy discussions for failing to equip students with the knowledge and the skills valued in the labour market, often leading to inadequate financial returns on their educational investments. Given the discursive link between higher education and job prospects, domain-specific experts and counsellors advise aspiring high school graduates to pursue degrees in business, finance and economics, in order to secure jobs. The statistics are striking: in 1966, 14% of all college graduates in the United States were majors in the humanities (central to the liberal arts); by 2010, that figure dropped by half to only 7%. The discourse is not simply limited to the low likelihood of finding jobs after a liberal arts degree, but also suggests that associated majors are concerned only with abstract ideas. This might have something to do with the context within which liberal arts emerged in early modern Europe, as a means of avoiding manual labour or working with hands. A liberal arts education that combined humanities with science was thought to produce a 'thinking' individual. In many ways, the idea of a liberal arts education seems antithetical to expectations of regional development that involves some technical training and knowledge. Despite its beginning, liberal arts have evolved in practice to be so much more.

Liberal arts enable students to comprehend those things that quite literally make us human. The skills that they cultivate in reasoning and critical thinking are every bit as important to future success in the workplace as learning to code, calculate, or raise capital. To paraphrase the longest serving President of Harvard University, Charles Eliot, a liberal arts education teaches a student a little bit of everything, and a great deal of one thing. Given such a powerful approach to generating scholars possessed of all-round disciplinary, and indeed, life skills, it appears peculiar that anyone would want to quibble with the exciting possibilities of such an outcome. Let us also note that while liberal arts is experiencing a decline in North America, it has seen a re-emergence in Europe and shows no sign of abating. Only five years ago, the University of Nottingham, U.K., opened a new liberal arts programme, promising that this new initiative will enable students to explore

what it means to be human. Today more than 20 universities in the U.K. offer some form of liberal arts and sciences programme. For some, this re-emergence has arisen partly as a corrective to the region's more recent over-specialisation in education.

Towards the east, a decade ago, in Hong Kong, a major educational overhaul saw numerous institutions move from a British-style three-year degree model to a U.S.-style four-year model, with the aim of incorporating the greater breadth evident in a 'liberal arts' approach. This compromise between the full breadth of a liberal arts degree and the specialised 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 specialised degree, rather than being offered as a degree in its own right. The idea is that specialised education can be supplemented with a humanistic approach to produce a well-rounded individual who practises critical thinking.

The world versus India

So, as an international phenomenon, the promotion of liberal arts education emerged within countries usually as a combination of indigenous educational reform movements and inchoate transnational advocacy networks. Of course, now there is universal consensus that liberal education prepares students well for life in a globalised, multicultural, society — one that makes them more aware of a variety of cultures and the need to communicate effectively across cultural differences; teaches them to evaluate new ideas with evidence; and formulate opinions, not make assumptions. Today's students also want an education that will address their desires for justice, service and self-expression, while equally wanting to develop the non-cognitive skills that will allow them to be successful in a globally competitive job market.

India offers an intriguing case in point. For a nation where higher education has traditionally focused on professional courses, including engineering and medicine, the last couple of decades has witnessed a sudden interest in liberal arts education. Businesses, non-governmental organisations, and government entities increasingly recognise that a discipline-specific technical education alone is not sufficient for the wholesome growth of the country's economy and society. 'Soft skills', which can be honed through a classical liberal arts education, are crucial in this context. While the rapid development of liberal arts in India has been welcomed by several, others ask — and, quite rightly — whether students will get jobs after liberal arts training; whether liberal arts is suitable for a

developing country; whether critical thinking skills help students solve India's societal problems — poverty, hunger, caste, and class inequalities.

Preparing students to be global citizens

Even for parents without the experience of studying for a degree, it does not take too much imagination to produce a 'usefulness' argument in favour of encouraging their children to take a scientific or technological subject. Even pure science holds out the prospect of a practical application one day. But for the liberal arts, the arguments are much more nuanced. The liberal arts impart the so-called soft skills associated with how to think for yourself, how to research and find things out for yourself, and how to communicate the results to other people. And there is a lot of truth in this. It is for these reasons that the new generation of liberal arts institutions in the country pioneered a model of education that appeals to several stakeholders. Employers highlight the communication skills and the creativity that liberal arts students bring to their workplaces and praise their ability to engage with multidisciplinary teams for effective problem-solving and creative thinking.

The technique of threading different kinds of content, conversations, and curriculum is the genius of the faculty in liberal arts institutions, who curate and incorporate the best of substance and knowledge in terms of interdisciplinary and experiential learning, the use of technology, and mentorship to attract young minds towards the best educational experience and to prepare them to be global citizens.

Evidently, we can no longer make the claim that liberal arts students have no concern for the real world. They are proving otherwise. They are taking over the world, one interwoven lesson at a time.

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