

TRENDS TOWARDS GLOBAL EXCELLENCE IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION:  
Taking the Liberal Arts Experience into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century\*

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**ABSTRACT**

Dissatisfaction over undergraduate education seems to be persistent and has been jeopardized by the boost in research performance as fuelled by global rankings. Yet it will continue to be the cornerstone and a key mission of higher education. Hence the tide is shifting and the global debate on "the world-class university" is increasingly inclusive towards excellence in teaching and learning. A renewed focus on liberal arts education is part of this global debate on redefining excellence. This article aims to explain why liberal arts education, as it is (re)emerging in different regions, seems to be an adequate response to the search for excellence in the 21st century. It explores the drivers for liberal arts education from an epistemological, economic and a social-moral point of view. The role of interdisciplinarity, generic skills, and citizenship in different regional context are discussed, and also an admission that a liberal arts education is no panacea -- that various limitations should be overcome and a truly global perspective is needed.

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**UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS**

Amid the massification of higher education, undergraduate education and its discontents is a subject of intensive discussion and analysis. The central elements of dissatisfaction are poor learning outcomes, student disengagement, low retention rates, stagnant or decreasing graduation rates, and lengthening time to degree. Conditions deteriorate, with overcrowded lecture halls, impoverished staff-student ratios, weakening of the research-teaching nexus, and faculty indifference to undergraduate teaching. Moreover, despite relentless efforts, persistent and or growing inequalities exist, while the undergraduate experience is becoming less affordable as a public service. As summarized by Muscatine: "the product of the present curriculum – despite a residue of good learning by good students in good courses – could hardly be called either excellent or economic" (2009, 51). Even in the most elite universities, disappointment with undergraduate achievement has been acknowledged (Bok, 2006; Lewis, 2006).

In contrast with the disappointing record of undergraduate education as a core mission of the university, research performance has been greatly boosted. On top of the already dominant publish-or-perish paradigm, underpinning research as the one and only task of the academy that really matters, global rankings have redoubled the strivings for research excellence. In many countries this has been accompanied by investments to further fuel the performance and reputation of national flagship institutions (Palfreyman & Tapper, 2009). Clearly, what is ranked has little to do with education. Prestige can hardly be built on achievements in teaching. Excellence initiatives in teaching, which are costly if they are to be made general to systems, are far less frequent than excellence initiatives in research.

In many ways, the growing dominance of research is to the detriment of undergraduate teaching. There has been abundant recognition of the fact that global rankings seem to enhance this effect (for an overview see Van der Wende, 2008). In this sense, in the context of the research university, undergraduate education is more endangered than professional or graduate education. It is rarely adequately prioritized. It seems that in the eyes of some it has even become the main problem of the

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research university, perhaps a handicap to individual and institutional progress in research and thus to global prestige. This kind of thinking leads readily to claims that the only real model of the globally competitive research university entails large and growing proportions of graduate students.

Yet undergraduate education will continue to represent the cornerstone of any higher education system, and thus a key mission of any institution, including the research university. Arguably, the future and the quality of research and the research university critically hinge upon the quality of undergraduate education (Elkana, forthcoming) and student success at this level represents a key indicator of the potential of a knowledge economy. Consequently both student demand and societal expectation will continue to rise. Lamenting the old days of elite higher education and associated Humboldtian-style ideals is therefore not helpful and actually resists the opportunities and challenges for undergraduate education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### THE SHIFTING TIDE: (RE-)DEFINING EXCELLENCE IN TEACHING AND LEARNING . . .

The role that higher education plays in developing human resources for a growing global economy is widely recognized. This has generated a renewed conversation about the purpose of education and awareness that it is necessary to reestablish a sense of academic mission that emphasizes teaching and the curriculum (Altbach *et al*, 2009; 2011). Moreover, concerns about turning out productive workers and not wasting resources are paramount in an era of globalization and fiscal constraints. This makes it largely inevitable that there will be growing discussion of higher education's accountability with respect to learning achievement (Arum and Roksa, 2011). The tide is shifting.

In parallel, the global debate on excellence or "the world-class university" has led to more awareness of the risks of unbalanced approaches that would favour performance in one area (research) strongly over that in others (education), compromising the fact that they represent together the essential and inseparable elements of the university's mission. Consequently, the need for differentiation, i.e. extending the range of dimensions for which excellence should be defined explicitly, as well as approaches in order to achieve this, is increasingly recognized (Marginson & Van der Wende, 2009; Van Vught 2009; Van der Wende, 2011a). Practical examples include the European initiative in developing a multidimensional global university ranking system, U-Multirank<sup>1</sup>, which includes particular reference to performance in the dimension of teaching and learning.

The two trends combined have produced a focus on (re-)defining excellence in teaching and learning, as part of comprehensive institutional performance (excellence in teaching *and* research). There is also growing support profiling and reputation building focused specifically on the teaching mission. The global context requires that performance in teaching and learning is internationally comparable. Reliable indicators and criteria for this are largely still to be developed. The OECD's project on Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes (AHELO)<sup>2</sup> should be a significant step in this direction.

For institutions (re-)defining excellence in teaching and learning implies the development of a vision on what should be learned, why, and how. It requires a future-oriented perspective on values, knowledge and skills essential for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### . . . AND A RENEWED FOCUS ON LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

In the US the discussion has been inspired not only by self-critique but also by impressive attempts to formulate the way forward. The LEAP report on "College Learning for the New Global Century" presented a convincing set of "essential learning outcomes" and "principles of excellence" (AAC&U, 2007). The report embodied a review and state-of-the-art consensus on liberal arts education as formulated by the American Association of Colleges and Universities' (AAC&U's) membership of over 1200 institutions. Important contributions to reinventing liberal education in terms of new pedagogies was also made by Levine (2006) and as a result of continued work by various dedicated organizations<sup>3</sup>.

Altbach establishes that this renewed conversation on the value and potential need for liberal education is not just an American trend but a global trend, which emphasizes a broad interdisciplinary curriculum focused on creativity, critical thinking, cultural awareness, problem solving, and communication skills (2009, 109). With the re-establishment of liberal education as a key curricular goal, on many campuses there has been, a renewed emphasis on teaching and curriculum, to a certain extent (2011, 249). Nussbaum (2010) notes that universities in many nations outside the US are striving to build a liberal arts component. They acknowledge the importance of liberal arts in crafting a public response to the problems of pluralism, fear, and suspicion their societies face (p. 125).

<sup>1</sup> See: [www.u-multirank.eu](http://www.u-multirank.eu)

<sup>2</sup> See: [www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo](http://www.oecd.org/edu/ahelo)

<sup>3</sup> The American Academy for Liberal Education (AALE), The TEAGLE Foundation, *The Center of Inquiry in the Liberal Arts at Wabash College*

In Europe, the Bologna Process oriented the discussion predominantly to structure. This led to the recognition of undergraduate education as a phase in its own right, and facilitated the (re-) emergence of liberal arts programs in Europe. In part this can be explained as a response to the need to differentiate the massified European systems, in relation to two main dimensions of differentiation. First, the need to develop broader and more flexible bachelor programs in order to overcome the disadvantages of too-early and over-specialization, re-establishing the balance between breadth and depth of the curriculum, thus enhancing learning effectiveness. Second, the need to establish more selective branches of higher education that are focused explicitly on excellence, that is, to redefine elite education in overly egalitarian systems (Van der Wende, 2011b).

A prominent example is the Netherlands, where since 1998 five liberal arts colleges have been established by leading research universities including Utrecht, Amsterdam, Leiden, and Maastricht. Known as "University Colleges", they represent a new branch of excellence in Dutch university education. This addresses the criticism that Dutch higher education displays an insufficient level of differentiation, as described by the OECD (2008). It argued that excellence is underrepresented, the international dimension should be enhanced, and too-early specialization should be avoided. University Colleges have responded on all these points.

Amsterdam University College (AUC) was established in 2009 as an excellence initiative jointly undertaken by the University of Amsterdam (UvA) and VU University Amsterdam (VU). AUC is a selective and residential honors college that offers an international liberal arts and sciences bachelor program, leading to a joint degree from the two founding universities. The fact that these two major research universities in Amsterdam joined forces to create a liberal arts and sciences undergraduate experience is an example of a "local cooperation for global competition" strategy and was based on the vision that the leaders of the future will have to work together across the boundaries of nationalities, cultures and disciplines, in order to be successful in the globally engaged and culturally diverse society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Hence the choice for the liberal arts model.

The Dutch university colleges recently obtained special status in higher education legislation, granting them more autonomy than regular university programmes with respect to the selection of students and the level of tuition fees. The model has attracted attention in the broader European context. For instance Germany has also established a number of such colleges and programs. There the Science Council is considering the model as an element in the further differentiation of the German higher education system (Wissenschaftsrat, 2011).

The trends in the United States and Europe are clearly not isolated from each other. This is recognized by Rothblatt (2003) who states that the transnational dialogue on liberal education has become more meaningful since massification of higher education in Europe forced policy makers to consider more differentiated and specialized systems of higher education, including approaches to undergraduate education such as liberal arts. Nevertheless, US and European models for liberal arts demonstrate both similarities and differences (for an overview see Van der Wende 2011b).

The renewed focus on liberal arts is not limited to these two regions either. Kirby (2008) notes that leading Chinese universities share a commitment to general or liberal education with their US counterparts. That is a commitment to educating the whole person and not just training the specialist, which may seem counterintuitive in an age increasingly dominated by science and technology and by pressures for ever-earlier and ever-greater specialization. But this understanding about the whole person, which has long-standing roots in Confucian approaches to education, is now the cornerstone of curricular reform in leading universities in China. These reforms have resulted in the introduction of small residential liberal-arts-style colleges for undergraduates in elite universities such as Peking, Fudan, Zhejiang, Wuhan, and Sun Yat-sen Universities. Others have unveiled general education programs or postponed specialization to the sophomore year and introduced broader course requirements (for example all Peking University students, even those in professional study programs, take courses in literature, philosophy and history), or introduced focused liberal arts curricula. United International College is China's first independent liberal arts college.

In the same region, Hong Kong has benefited from the extension of the undergraduate phase from three to four years by installing the liberal arts a major role in the first two years of the new bachelor curriculum. Some leading Japanese universities are considering this approach as well. Liberal arts programs have also been set up in Taiwan and recently the National University of Singapore announced a partnership with Yale University to introduce a new liberal arts college. Such initiatives are also being undertaken in other regions, such as the Middle East. New York University recently established a residential liberal arts college in Abu Dhabi. Previous examples in that region date back to the American University in Beirut (founded in 1866) and the American University in Cairo (1919). More recently liberal arts colleges have been developed in Russia, Central and Eastern Europe, Central Asia, Palestine and Bangladesh. Institutions that attempt to align the broader underpinnings of liberal education with professional education can be found in Turkey, India, and South Africa (McGill Peterson, 2011).

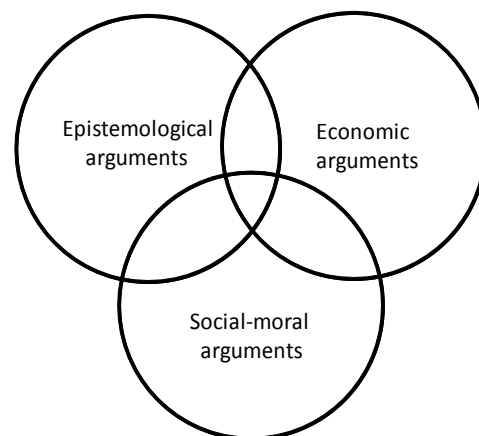
This global trend to renewed conversation on the value of and potential need for liberal arts education is both an example of the manner in which curriculum considerations have become broadened in an era of heightened globalization and internationalization, and an example of the fast passage of trends on the global scale. But what exactly are the main aims and rationales driving this trend? To what extent are they similar or different across the various regions? To what extent is liberal arts education 'truly global'? How does this trend relate to the way in which excellence is being defined for undergraduate education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

### DEFINING GLOBAL EXCELLENCE: THE DRIVERS FOR LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Liberal arts education should provide students with both breadth and depth. It should ensure broad knowledge of culture, science and society, and in-depth study in a specific area of interest. More specifically it should help students to develop a sense of social responsibility; and also develop strong and transferable intellectual and practical skills such as communication, analytical, and problem-solving ability, and a demonstrated competency to apply knowledge and skills in real-world settings (AAC&U, 2007).

The arguments in favor of this type of approach to undergraduate education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be described in three broad categories:

- The first type of argument is of an *epistemological* character. It relates to the development of knowledge and the fact that the most exciting science is happening at the interface of the traditional disciplines. Some of the "big challenges" both in science and society are just not solvable by single-discipline approaches. This has led to a substantial focus on cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary research into themes such as climate change, energy, health and well-being. This trend needs to be reflected in the curriculum.
- The second type of argument is of an *economic and utilitarian* nature. It relates to the employability of graduates. A society characterized by a knowledge economy, innovation, and global competition requires the so-called "21<sup>st</sup> century skills" which enable graduates to be creative, critical thinkers, and problem solvers who can cooperate in teams and communicate across the boundaries of languages, cultures and disciplines.
- The third category of argument relates to the *moral and social* dimension and to the humanistic tradition of liberal arts. This underlines the importance of educating the whole person, including personal and intellectual development with a view to social responsibility and democratic citizenship.



As depicted in the figure above and as shall be discussed in more detail below, these arguments are not necessarily mutually exclusive. To some extent they are interrelated. They are not radically new either, although it should be noted that the first two categories of arguments have been strongly driven by developments in the global knowledge economy into a converging agenda for undergraduate education the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The third category, the social-moral dimension, is perhaps the most complex one to (re-)define in this "new global century". It does not seem to be characterized by convergence in the political and ideological sense. Moreover, tensions may arise between the economic and the social/moral arguments. An increasingly utilitarian emphasis in education may be to the detriment of the humanistic traditions and values, as argued by Nussbaum (2010).

### INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND THE ROLE OF DISCIPLINES

The focus on interdisciplinarity is increasingly recognized as a key component for excellence in undergraduate education, rather than postponing it to graduate study and research training. The introduction of real-life situations, broad themes and "big

questions" from the first year on allows students to develop a broad intellectual horizon and motivates them to learn; or rather it avoids the usual boredom and drop out (Elkana, forthcoming). Learning is enhanced when students are engaged in the process through the study of challenging problems related to their backgrounds, history and goals (Muscatine, 2009). Moreover this approach can motivate better subsequent choices for disciplinary study; for example, the choice of physics and chemistry to enable a better understanding of sustainability problems). At the same time it is clear that the interdisciplinary approach cannot replace rigorous teaching of the disciplines. Genuine interdisciplinary work presupposes not just broad interdisciplinary thinking but also the ability to collaborate intelligently with disciplinary experts. This requires in-depth training in at least one (and ideally two) disciplines. Gardner (2008, 55) points out: "If no single discipline is being applied, then clearly interdisciplinary thinking cannot be at work". As he sees it the "disciplined mind" has mastered at least one way of thinking as a distinctive mode of cognition; and this, together with the ability to synthesize, allows the "creating mind" to break new ground. This suggests that from first year seminars onwards the sessions that deal with real-life situations should run in parallel with rigorous introductory disciplinary courses (Elkana, forthcoming).

Muscatine (2009) talks about a combination of "nuclear (interdisciplinary problem-oriented) seminars" and "planetary courses". This combination of interdisciplinary and disciplinary learning epitomizes the notion of "breadth and depth" as an inherent feature of a liberal arts education. It transcends the discussion on disciplinarity *or* interdisciplinarity. However, questions of balance, timing and sequence remain important, especially in combination with the notion of student choice – another notion inherently related to liberal concerns with personal development and a broad intellectual horizon.

Another frequent discussion concerns the respective roles of the humanities and the sciences in the curriculum. The humanities, the study of other cultures, languages, and religions, and education in moral reasoning and philosophy, are essential for broad development, critical thinking, and ethical judgment. At the same time, young people must learn to think scientifically, that is to understand the scientific method, and enjoy some mastery of science, technology and computers, if they are to have informed opinions or make reasonable decisions on controversial issues like stem cell research and nuclear power. C.P. Snow (1959) in his influential lecture on "The Two Cultures" stated that the breakdown of communication between the "two cultures" of modern society — the sciences and the humanities - was a major hindrance to solving the world's problems.

A 21st century liberal arts approach should be able to bridge and integrate these two sets of views. It can build in this respect directly on its origins, whereby the seven liberal arts were defined as the Trivium (the literary arts) and the Quadrivium (the mathematical arts). Although the humanities have dominated liberal arts curricula for a long time, mathematics is without doubt core to a liberal arts education, in the forms of quantitative reasoning, quantitative and statistical literacy. Science may be viewed as part of a liberal education in two ways: as an area of study, whether through focus on scientific phenomena or via diverse disciplines providing material to be classified and integrated; and as a mode of inquiry or thinking. The second is one basis for arguing that science is a liberal art (Schild, 2005).

The President of Princeton University recently argued that liberal arts institutions have two missions that are fundamentally different: the education of future scientists and the education of scientifically literate citizens. She also argues that liberal arts have always included scientific disciplines. They are not the sole preserve of liberals and artists as some would have it (Tilghman, 2010). In fact, the US top liberal arts colleges produce a higher rate of graduates that go on to receive PhD's in science and engineering than do the most selective private research universities. This is attributed to small classes, motivated teachers and cross training in science and the humanities (Cech, 1999; Steitz, 2001). Science education clearly has its place in 21st century liberal arts. Hence the label "liberal arts and science education" is becoming more and more common, allowing students to choose courses from the broad range of programs in the sciences, humanities and social sciences and stimulating them to integrate the insights they gained from them.

A third area of discussion refers to the contradiction that is traditionally perceived, and quite often still perceived between liberal and professional education. However, "this divorce rests on a superstition, that the practical is the enemy of the true. This is nonsense" (Menand, 2010, 16). Clearly the old denigration of useful knowledge is passé, in fact the knowledge society cannot tolerate the separation of technical/practical from the theoretical (Elkana, forthcoming). The idea that liberal arts education is non-vocational per se is challenged by the nature and complexity of the major issues and problems of our time. In fact, new pathways across the traditional dividing lines between liberal arts and sciences and the professional fields are needed. Strong emphasis should be placed on teaching students how to integrate and apply their learning, by connecting analytical skills with practical experience in putting knowledge into use (AAC&U, 2007). By engaging in an undergraduate experience with the remarkable breath of the liberal arts, students build the foundation on which to erect future much more focused academic or professional studies. This provides students with the opportunity to prepare themselves not for one profession, but for any profession, including those not yet invented (Tilghman, 2010).

### ***Generic skills and the specificity of regional contexts***

The focus on generic skills is in general strongly linked to the concept of employability. Thus it was presented above as an economic / utilitarian argument. Employment in the 21st century is expected to be influenced by more volatile labor markets and careers and a changing demand for skills, in particular an increasing demand for non-routine interactive and non-routine analytical skills, accompanied by a decreasing demand for routine cognitive and manual skills (OECD, 2010). Typical “21st century skills” include creativity and innovation, critical thinking, problem solving,, communication, collaboration, information, IT, and media literacy, social and cross-cultural skills, leadership and responsibility (Trilling & Fadel, 2009). The OECD is not the only agent promoting this view. The European Commission advertises its view on “New skills for new jobs” by proposing a stronger focus on more generic skills, while criticizing the mono-disciplinary and rigid nature of most university programs in Europe, (EC, 2005). Earlier the UK Dearing Report (1997) pleaded for broad multi-disciplinary degrees and a stronger focus on skills development for employability. Obviously, employers subscribe to the view that graduates need to be creative thinkers, and should be able to communicate, to reason, create, write and speak and to provide leadership. Increasingly, they also recognize that a liberal arts and science education nurtures these skills and talents. Many of the skills needed to survive and thrive in the new economy are exactly those a well-rounded liberal arts education has always provided: depth, breadth, knowledge in context and motion, and the search for deeper understanding. Consequently, liberal arts and sciences graduates are (or ought to be!) innovative and nimble, can think across platforms, understand society and culture, and see technology as a tool rather than an end in itself. This gives them an advantage in creating opportunities in, and drawing the best from, the new economy (Greenwald, 2010).

The above argument illustrates that relevance in economic terms, skill development for employability, is not necessarily reserved for applied academic or professional programs or at odds with a liberal arts approach. On the contrary: the above-mentioned skills are relevant for graduates from all programs (see for instance Bok, 2006). Nevertheless, several authors have mounted critiques of the framing of undergraduate reform purely in terms of employability, for example in Europe. In the view of the critics the Bologna Process sees employability simply as training for the workforce, without a broader more intellectual interpretation (Elkana, forthcoming). A strong focus on the economic advantages of tertiary education which emphasizes vocational themes in utilitarian terms fails to emphasize a broader set of competencies such as critical thinking, quantitative literacy, communication skills, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement; the areas that are the traditional strength of the American liberal arts tradition (Gaston, 2008).

Others have mounted the parallel critique that European universities appear less interested as yet in the educational values that have defined the B.A. in many American colleges, such as a broad undergraduate education including the humanities (Kirby, 2008). It has been suggested that in some places the emerging concern for liberal arts in Europe is not for liberal education per se as for better student services (Rothblatt, 2003). These charges have at least some substance. Although Bologna has (re-) introduced undergraduate education as an educational phase in its own right, it has provided few substantial messages on the importance of widening the scope of undergraduate curricula or the development of generic skills. Deeper understanding of knowledge, critical thinking and interdisciplinarity has not been as central in implementation of the process as they could have been (Van der Wende, 2011b).

There seems to be a broad consensus about the importance of critical thinking as a key element of undergraduate education. The information age, with a wealth of data available to anyone anytime, requires the ability to evaluate claims to knowledge. Graduates need to be good at logical reasoning, and at discriminating between high and low-quality information, and between reliable and unreliable sources. Especially in the Asian context critical thinking seems to be also related to the aim to produce more creative graduates, thereby redressing what is considered to be one of the main shortcomings of the Asian systems. As has been described above, liberal arts education is seen by leading institutions in the region as an excellent medium in which to do this. However, there are also concerns as to whether the liberal education model can actually flourish in an illiberal context, e.g. in China where political indoctrination is still considered part of the political process and where freedom of speech is not guaranteed as a human right (Huistendahl, 2010). Similar concerns have been expressed with regard to the Yale University's venture in establishing a liberal arts college jointly with the National University of Singapore. Yale academics asserted that the liberal arts do not square with Singapore's human and academic rights situation and that academic freedom and freedom of expression are not be guaranteed in a censorship-laden context (Yung, 2011).

### **CITIZENSHIP AND THE NEED FOR A TRULY GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE**

The third group of arguments in favor of the liberal arts relate to the moral and social dimension and in particular to social responsibility and democratic citizenship. The notion of citizenship deserves special attention in analysing the debate. Clearly it has a strong moral dimension. Elkana (forthcoming) describes the “concerned citizen” as someone conscious of the major problems that confront humanity today, and aware of the limitations of our existing intellectual tools to cope with these. This suggests a commitment to contribute to overcoming these problems and limitations, which is seen as a hallmark of responsible

citizenship. In democratic societies it is taken for granted that this also implies democratic citizenship. As discussed above, this may be less obvious in certain other countries. Questions about the scope of citizenship are important here. Should it be national ("citizenship for nation building"), regional (e.g. European or Asian), global, or all at the same time? The LEAP report on College Learning in the Global Century (AAC&U, 2007) presented a convincing view on the need for a global perspective for liberal arts education by stating that recent world events have brought into the foreground the importance of linking academic education to issues of democratic citizenship, pluralism, and interculturalism.

Influential American scholars also argue that shaping citizens through higher education means that students must be prepared for a culturally diverse and international world, which requires understanding the perspectives of a wide variety of cultures (Nussbaum, 1997). This is more the case now as young people rarely leave college as ignorant about the non-Western world as students did some decades ago (ibid, 2010). The fact that technology has linked humanity in unprecedented ways implies that we have a greater opportunity than ever before to become global citizens (Gardner, 2011).

Nevertheless, accounts of essential learning outcomes in liberal arts demonstrate that intercultural knowledge receives low ratings from both US faculty and students (AAC&U, 2005). Bok (2006) acknowledges that even the most prestigious US programs still lack a strong focus on global knowledge, such as foreign languages, international understanding and intercultural awareness. Liberal arts advocates in other regions are convinced that the inter-cultural perspective, such as for instance developed in the liberal arts program at Warsaw University (Poland), should be invigorated not only in Europe but also in the US - despite the latter's weakness in the mastering of foreign languages, which in Europe is seen as the bedrock of education and mobility (Tymowski, 2011).

The president of the American University in Beirut (Libanon) has stated that as national animosities remain and cross-cultural incomprehension persists, preparation for cosmopolitan citizenship should be a purpose of a liberal arts education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Fallis, 2009). It may come as no surprise that the plea for intercultural and cosmopolitan approaches is heard from regions that historically and even currently face substantial conflicts. This does not mean the goal is not shared more widely. At a recent AAC&U meeting on globalization as a goal for higher education, college representatives examined how to move past superficial ideas about globalization by for instance integrating global themes (e.g. global health and human rights) into the curriculum. It was acknowledged that business, governments and other employers need college graduates with a better understanding of foreign cultures and the world beyond their borders. With such a workforce they will be better positioned for the decades ahead (Inside Higher Ed, 2011).

Here it should be clear that learning at least one foreign language is imperative, in order to develop the cognitive ability to function in a different linguistic system and the flexibility related to switching between such systems. It is also imperative to truly understand the meaning of "foreign cultures". These skills are indispensable; hence multinational employers in a global era are looking for foreign language skills and intercultural awareness. This point is taken very seriously in China (Hulbert, 2007). There the requirement for a foreign language is covered by the study of English. Beyond this, Boya College for liberal arts at Sun Yat-sen university has chosen to teach Latin and Greek. In Europe, the choice of foreign languages would be more pragmatic and geared towards modern languages (although Latin and Greek is studied by many students in grammar schools before embarking on university programs); but increasingly extending the traditional European array of languages includes Chinese and Arabic.

The choice of foreign languages to teach and learn in the global world has thereby moved to the centre of the debate, displacing any dispute or doubt concerning the necessity of foreign language acquisition. It should also be clear that this type of learning can only succeed in a truly intercultural context, which requires a strongly diverse student body and faculty profile. Yet in the great majority of writings and discussions, the importance of diversity in shaping the liberal arts experience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has so far been underexposed.

#### **LIBERAL ARTS AS A TREND TOWARDS GLOBAL EXCELLENCE IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY, BUT NO PANACEA**

The liberal arts model seems to respond to a variety of demands that define the criteria for excellence in undergraduate education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Its strengths have been analyzed across three main categories of argument (epistemological, economical, and social-humanistic). At the same time various conceptual and inter-regional differences in the debate have been highlighted. Yet liberal arts education, as a broad model, seems to constitute a suitable bridge or means of integration across most of these suggested arguments and practices. At the same time, a number of reservations need to be underlined.

First, the empirical evidence for liberal arts as a global trend, as compared to other types of undergraduate education, is still weak. Comparative international criteria and methods are mostly lacking (see above). However, within the US it was recently found that students who take liberal arts and science courses fare better in terms of the increase in skills measured by the Collegiate Learning Assessment. In other words liberal education is more effective at enhancing student learning (Arum &

Roksa, 2011). In the Netherlands, on average liberal arts colleges generate a rate of student success that is two to three times better in terms of retention and time to degree, when compared to regular undergraduate programs in research universities (Reumer & Van der Wende, 2010). Liberal programs also have a more significant score regarding the pursuit of research degrees by their graduates.

Second, the fact that various trends toward global excellence in undergraduate education seem to amalgamate into a liberal arts approach to undergraduate education, at least at a conceptual level and at the forefront of a number of leading systems and institutions, does not imply that this approach or model can be seen as a panacea for all the problems of undergraduate education that were listed in the introductory part of this paper. The number of students enrolled in this type of institutions and programs is quite small, especially outside the US. One of the most pressing questions therefore remains how this type of undergraduate experience can be provided at scale.

Finally, the global dimension of liberal arts education as such deserves more attention and would greatly benefit from a truly global platform for debate on liberal arts and on undergraduate education at large. A future-oriented perspective shall guide this debate on the values, knowledge and skills essential for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such a debate could be highly fruitful in that the liberal arts model allows the higher education sector to move beyond the still frequently heard nostalgic deliberations about the historical models for university education and the often endless discussions about artificial or false pedagogical dichotomies.

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