

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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M1 | Beaumaris Lounge

Chaired by Ruth Walker

Thu 12 Dec 2019

15:00 - 15:30

Liberal Arts in UK Higher Education: Is There A Distinctive British Approach

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Research Domain: Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract: Liberal arts approaches, traditionally associated with American higher education, are becoming increasingly popular throughout the world. Twenty-one universities have liberal arts degree programmes in the UK, even though its education system emphasises depth and specialisation over broad based, interdisciplinary approaches. Do these UK degrees resemble US programmes, or do they take a different approach that creates a unique British model? This study analyses the curricula of degrees in the UK, analysing them for common structures and patterns and comparing them to US approaches. The analysis finds that the UK adopts a more specialised and narrow curriculum that looks more like other UK degrees than more broad-based ones in the US. However, the UK also emphasises specialised interdisciplinary work that involves research training and a final-year project. The result is a unique degree that specialises in interdisciplinarity in a focused way, contrasting with the broader, but less coherent, multidisciplinary American approach.

Paper: The liberal arts are currently enjoying 'golden age' of attention in global higher education (Marber and Araya 2017). Proponents claim that complex problem solving in the world today requires people who can think across disciplines, work well in groups, and engage in effective critical thinking, and that these skills are best enhanced by pursuing a liberal arts education. A number of universities and countries are considering adopting more liberal arts approaches to education. China is adopting a four year degree, and universities have been adopting broader, more interdisciplinary approaches to undergraduate education in Australia, Hong Kong, India, the Netherlands, and other, particularly Asian, countries (Godwin 2015; Haberberger 2017; van der Wende 2011).

Liberal arts degrees have also become a new development in British higher education, with twenty-one universities opening new degrees. The definition of a liberal arts education, though, is not fixed and has changed substantially over time (Roche 2010). What are the common characteristics of a liberal arts education? The US is seen historically as the main proponent of this type of degree. The following table compares requirements across the various types of accreditation bodies for US higher education, as well as the American Association of Colleges and Universities' LEAP standards, which

attempt to provide a more modern and relevant definition.

	Student choice of modules	Choice of subject concentration after admission	Breadth of disciplines across Humanities, Fine Arts, Social Sciences, Mathematics, and Natural Sciences	Further Breadth across Global Knowledge, Civics, and Inquiry Based Learning	Intellectual skills: critical thinking, written and oral communication, and quantitative and information literacy
LEAP			√	√	√
Higher Learning Commission (2014)			stipulates broad knowledge		√
Southern Association of Colleges and Universities (2012)			√		
Middle States Regional Accreditation for US higher education (2015)			sufficient scope to draw students into new areas of intellectual experience	global awareness and cultural sensitivity	√
Western Association of Schools and Colleges (2013)			√	√	√
New England Commission of Higher Education (2016)	√		√		√
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities			√		√
WASC Senior College and University Commission (2013)			√		√

A widespread consensus appears for two basic components. Students must take a range of courses across all the major disciplinary areas, and they must develop key intellectual skills such as writing and communication. There is a substantial amount of support for widening the essential skills to include themes such as internationalisation, inquiry based learning, and civic education but these

broader requirements do not appear across most of the accrediting bodies.

These definitions provide characteristics with which to compare British degrees. This study analyses programme specifications for all 21 UK degrees in liberal arts. The structure and content is analysed to find common approaches. First, do these degrees require breadth across different disciplines, including the humanities, social sciences, and sciences? Are there other key skill requirements such as languages or internationalisation? Is there provision for student choice or electives outside of the core subject areas? Do they require interdisciplinary work through specialist core modules? Do they require research methods and a final year project like other subjects?

There are now liberal arts degree programmes in twenty-one different British universities. Of these, nine are Russell Group, six are pre-1992 universities and six are post-1992 universities. This study surveys all of these degrees to find common structures and approaches in their organisation of the degree. The survey looks for features in common with the American approach as well as more traditional British curricular patterns.

All Three Categories of Disciplines Required	5%
All Three Disciplines Allowed	33%
Some Science Related Teaching (not taught by science faculties)	33%
Humanities and Social Sciences Included	43%
Humanities Only	29%
Free Electives (outside of the degree subject areas)	90%
Language Required	19%
Study Abroad Required	10%
Bespoke, Required Liberal Arts Modules that specifically teach interdisciplinary approaches	81%
Research Methods	62%
Final Year Research Project	66%

The UK approach to higher education is distinctive in the global environment. It pursues a focused and narrow curriculum in both secondary and higher education institutions outside of Scotland. The impact of that approach is evident in the liberal arts degrees. The degrees rarely meets the most common definitions of liberal arts in terms of its breadth and multidisciplinary. All accreditation bodies in the US agree that every students experience each of the broad disciplinary areas, usually defined as arts and humanities, social sciences, and STEM subjects.

By contrast, only one British degree required this level of breadth. Most of the programmes largely confine students to different subjects within the humanities. With a few exceptions, these degrees largely combine the parts of existing degrees in other humanities subjects. The provision of free

electives is almost universal in these degrees, even though they are rare in traditional subjects. That approach creates a broader, more flexible, multidisciplinary degree that is distinctive in the British context (Parker 2017). However, it does not meet the requirements for breadth normally seen in liberal arts approaches. Few programmes even allow students to take science modules as part of their degree. Some try to include some science using non-science modules or faculty through an interdisciplinary module. Nonetheless, these attempts to broaden the curriculum only occur in a minority of programmes.

The real distinctiveness of these degrees appears in their use of required modules that explicitly teach students to conduct interdisciplinary analysis. This model appears particularly innovative and consistent with the wider philosophical notions of the liberal arts that encourage breadth of approach and the importance of critical thinking (AAC&U 2006).

Reflecting the wider cultural approach of British higher education, where these degrees pursue interdisciplinarity, they do so with the same focus of purpose and sustained attention as found in other single subject degrees and professions. This approach is very different from simply doing work in many different subjects. Taking coursework in different disciplines only provides a breadth in exposure to different approaches that defines multidisciplinary. It does not teach interdisciplinarity, which is more complex and requires exploration of the intersection of disciplines and teaches you how to approach analyses when there are conflicting standards of evidence and evaluation.

British liberal arts degrees do not depict a particularly broad or well-rounded education, particularly with regards to making scientists and non-scientists cross over to engage with one another. The pursuit of specialisation seems particularly at odds with the ethos of the liberal arts. However, single subject degrees are also not as narrow as it seems at first glance, and their single minded pursuit of high impact experiences that require disciplinary knowledge and experience provides an aspect of liberal education, the critical thinking and analytical skills, that may not be guaranteed by a broader, less focused curriculum that focuses more about taking coursework in different disciplines rather than linking these courses to create a progression of skill development. British degrees do embody the ethos of the liberal arts in the cultivation of critical analysis and thinking, and they take seriously the challenge of working across disciplines with differing standards of evidence and evaluation, even if they do not particularly value breadth beyond the humanities.

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