

# Peering into the Futures of Liberal Arts

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## Abstract

*This paper peers into the futures of liberal arts and articulates numerous contexts engaged in shaping the futures of liberal arts. It sought to answer the following questions: Is liberal arts likely to face extinction? Are there other liberal arts contexts other than the Western liberal arts model? Is there such a thing as a non-Western framework of liberal arts education? And can it be renewed, reinterpreted, redefined or translated in the context of the other, beyond the Western tradition? If so, what are its nuances, constraints, intricacies, hopes, and futures? What are the futures of non-Western and Western liberal arts models?*

*Debates and discussions about the future of liberal arts have been going on mainly in the net and its future is being seen in the way that its Western proponents want it to be – a liberal arts that is useful in the workplace and promotes individualism and freedom of choice as well. Non-Western academics, however, see different patterns and values as liberal arts now becomes culture bound. Additionally, they insist that it must go beyond the current view and accentuate liberal arts that cultivate one's identity and nurtures skills for life.*

**Keywords:** Liberal Arts, Liberal Arts 2.0, Civilizations, Culture, Workplace Trends

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Debates and discussions about the future of the liberal arts have been predominant in the worldwide web. Many argue that the discipline needs a facelift to successfully adapt to the challenging complexity of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In a flat world, Thomas Friedman (2007) reports that the world as we know it now requires people to have high preparation in reading, writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history, and the arts. And to cope up with the next level of global competition or collaboration, this era requires nurturing the right brain and emphasizing horizontal thinking. As such, going global would mean going into liberal arts (Jaschik, 2011).

Reading the works of leading futurists, however, (for example Inayatullah, Dator, Slaughter and others) led me to consider the future as more open, surprising and pregnant

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with multiplicity. As Zia Sardar (1999, p.173) put it: “we need to think of the future in pluralistic terms...like an ocean...where we can sail almost anywhere, in any direction. There is nothing inevitable or determined about the future. It can be made and shaped by all of us according to our desires.”

Futures studies, according to Sohail Inayatullah (2003), are attempts to investigate alternative futures, including the worldviews and myths that underlie them. In part, it involves critiquing current ideologies, understanding cultural biases, diagnosing the effects of particular interests and opening futures work to non-Western sources, languages, and patterns of thought (Inayatullah, 2003). Futures studies is rich in tools that can enrich our ways to better understand the context of educational traditions that celebrates and nurture human freedom.<sup>1</sup> It can open hidden possibilities, seek out alternative futures, and organize views about the futures of liberal arts. Thus, futures studies can offer liberal arts educators, policymakers, advocates and enthusiasts a “deeper, wider, and longer”<sup>2</sup> perspective of the liberal arts.

My interest to inquire and eventually assimilate the futures of liberal arts is the purpose of this paper. Specifically, it sought to investigate the decline and resurgence of liberal arts in the West and the assimilation and development of the discipline in Non-Western societies. It also looked into the context of liberal arts other than the West and identified the nuances, constraints, intricacies, hopes and futures of liberal arts in Western and Non-Western civilizations. Moreover, this paper attempts to put some issue on a cultural and civilizational context and weaves a number of issues on how the others participate in the liberal arts debate. This does not assume comprehensiveness, but rather one intellectuals attempt to take the public discourse a step forward. Additionally, this paper asserts liberal arts will continue to develop into the future and remain significant as a discipline.

#### Liberal Arts: Its Roots and Context

Historically, liberal arts originated from the classical thought of ancient Greece, about the fifth century BC (Cronon, p.6).<sup>3</sup> From a long period of cultural history, the idea of liberal education began in the Culture of Wars of democratic Athens. According to Connor (1998), the earliest text that used the word ‘liberal’ in education can be found in Plutarch’s Cimon. Liberal skills were believed to be the most desirable anyone could possess. Liberal skills in this era meant rhetorical skills. As Isocrates argued:

*“...whether men have been liberally educated from the earliest years is not to be determined by their wealth or such advantages, but is made manifest most of all by their speech...and that those skilled in speech are not men of power in their own cities but are also held in honor in other states.” (Connor, 1998, p.7)*

The earliest passages mentioning liberal education refer directly to Athens during its democratic period and associated it with the skill of public speaking and hence, a prerequisite to political leadership.

#### Liberal Arts as a Political Tool

This context suggests that this foundation of liberal arts lies in training

young people to acquire oratorical skills to advance the democratic agenda and political leadership of Athens. Specifically, the culture of wars in Athens and their struggle for freedom could have been the reason that liberal education came about. Considering that slavery was rampant during the Hellenic period, it distinguished the free people from the slaves. In other words, this would become the type of education suitable to a free person (Connor, 1998). As such, to be liberal had connotations of challenging authority, individualism, spiritedness, and outspokenness.

The Greek construct of liberal arts education provided the foundation in the Western tradition. The emphasis on political leadership, critical thinking, individualism and autonomy shaped the core of the contemporary western liberal arts discourse.

## **Liberal Arts and the Education of the Western Mind**

In the Medieval period, liberal arts evolved when the first universities were established in Europe. The founding of the University of Bologna and Paris between 1100 and 1200 AD incorporated liberal arts as the foundation of medieval scholarship. The seven liberal arts flourished when European University systems developed and spread around the world. In the 1800s when liberal arts was introduced in the US it retained the original concept of liberal education (Conference Report, Hollings Center for International Dialogue, 2007, p.9).<sup>4</sup> In the US this was about to change when the tempo and extent of technological and social change increased, and with the rapid growth of college enrollment (Schoeban, 1968, p.1). With its traditional role of transmitting cultural heritage, liberal arts education would now instruct the scholar “the attributes of man that enlarge their capacity for uncoerced choices” (Schoeben, 1968, p.2). According to Schoeben (1968) liberal arts would mean the “liberating arts”. Flowering fully in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, liberal arts became the aim and center of American higher education. Advanced liberal arts studies was made “reserved for those few whose backgrounds prepared them for roles of authority and leadership” (Schoeben, 1968, p.2). According to Connor (1998) the emergence of liberal arts and the establishment of liberal arts colleges in the US, like Athens, was a necessity. The growth of political democracy in the US stimulated liberal arts education and the values that sustained it received extensive intellectual support.

For Kathryn Mohrman (2006), the Western narrative of freedom of choice, political democracy and individualism in liberal arts education may not be that fitting or can be quite strange to the non-Western audience whose values differ and predominantly collectivist in a complex web of relationships (Fitzgerald, 1999; Aguinis & Roth, 2003).

## **Liberal Arts in a Non-Western Context**

Western and non-Western ways of knowing, values, and conventions have distinct characteristics.<sup>5</sup> The concept of time and space and ways of conceiving reality are in many cases contradictory. Western traditions put a premium on the individual as a unit of analysis while their non-Western counterpart emphasize on the community. Likewise, the Western view prefers to have a linear (progressive) view of history and a materialistic view of the real, while the non-West has a propensity for cycles and the transcendental (Inayatullah, 2000). Furthermore, Western values

embrace individualism expressed through autonomy and freedom of choice as the primary universal value. On the other hand, non-Western values emphasize collectivity, social cohesion, community, as well as dependence and interdependence as sources of inspiration and development (Fitzgerald, 1999). Thus, collectivism is understood to affirm the solidarity of society (Aguinis and Roth, 2003). These differences in inclinations have significant implications on liberal arts discourse.

First, 'liberal arts' is considered by many non-western academics as an inappropriate term. In the Conference Report of the Hollings Center on Independent Universities in the Muslim World (2007), the word 'liberal' is seen as controversial, political, American and western oriented. A widely noted argument came from a Muslim Professor who claimed that cultural and contextual differences will doom the Western liberal arts model to failure in many of these non-western, predominantly Muslim societies (Conference Report, Holling Center for International Dialogue on Independent Muslim Universities, 2007, p.11).

Secondly, using her American Western lens, Mohrman (2006) construes a liberally-education person as an individual, a college graduate, a young adult speaking one on one with another individual to listen, to empower and to persuade. The community, the tribe and the village are hardly a part of her image. For the non-Western lens, however, the existence of families and communities is predominant.

Assuming that non-Western societies have a different picture in their minds, Mohrman concluded that "the unspoken, unacknowledged emphasis on the individual might well be the biggest challenge in translating the concept of liberal education to cultures beyond Western tradition" (2006, p.60).

## Non-Western Liberal Arts Contexts

In his book *Clash of Civilizations*, Samuel Huntington (1998) opines that culture and cultural identities at the broadest level will be the primary source of interaction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to him, a civilization-based world order is emerging and non-Western civilizations are reaffirming the value of their own cultures. Distinctions among civilizations will not be ideological, political nor economic but cultural. Their philosophical assumptions, underlying values, social relations, customs and overall outlook will be the key issues of the future (Huntington, 1998).

In the same vein, Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu (1997) reiterated the importance of civilizational discourse and cultural depth as good sources in the construction of alternative paradigms. Like Johan Galtung, Davutoğlu analogized civilizations to the psychological construct of a human being. He argued that self-perception is echoed in the social sphere (Taskapu, 2010). He also added that without dealing with the problem of self-perception, human beings cannot deal with the problems emanating from the perception of the other. Thus, by understanding self-perception we would be able to know a civilization's flexibility and rigidity to the psycho-cultural impact of otherness in plurality.

Drawing from his experience with the Turkish experiment on Westernization, Davutoğlu concluded that fundamental to the emergence of civilizational self-perception is worldview. Davutoğlu (1998) argues "there is a connection between a man of Islamic self-perception and the society he constructs and between a man of a cultural Chinese self-perception and his social order" (Taskapu, 2010). And since human beings have always endeavored for security and freedom, he thinks that

“human beings manage to develop their self-perceptions in relation to his need for freedom” (Taskapu, 2010).

These perspectives, in my view, are crucial to the liberal arts education debate and based on my experience in and readings on liberal arts and futures studies, such discourse is essential and runs parallel with its future as different civilizations compete and converge in reshaping the 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal arts.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Arts and Sciences in a Cultural Context**

Chinese civilization is one of the most enduring as it has traveled long in space and time. Consequently, the Chinese have developed their own meaning of existence, human nature, affairs and society.<sup>7</sup>

Philosophically, they have an optimistic view of humanity and believe in their knowledge, wisdom and ability to transform and reshape oneself via the rhythms of nature (Zhao, 2009). They are, as many have assumed, solidly grounded in the Confucian, Taoist, and Buddhist discourse and that they heavily rely on themselves for survival (Zhao, 2009).

The humanist spirit of the Chinese brings to the fore the need to look into their own inner being for strength and hope, and know that humans are inherently good and must stay close to what is essential to human experience (Zhao, 2009). With this, the Chinese humanist project using the Confucian discourse, this worldview makes the human being’s relationship with parents the most natural state of human existence (Zhao, 2009; Aguinis & Roth, 2003, p.15).<sup>8</sup> This view is central to the Chinese political and cultural project (Zhao, 2009; Moody, 2009).

In this context, the Chinese discourse of the individual was about engagement in the civic culture and a commitment to a network of social, political, and ethical relationships embedded in the family and extending to a wider social sphere - in the cultural community (Moody, 2009).

While the Greek civilization emphasizes public speaking, political leadership, freedom, and the advancement of democratic institutions in its liberal arts discourse, the Confucian story centers on civic culture, mutual respect and complimentary obligations, virtuous behavior, self-control, hard work, skills acquisition, patience and perseverance and sustained inter-relationships. The Confucian’s interest in education was to train the young in terms of achieving successful careers in the civil service and of gaining wealth, fame and reputation over self-cultivation (Aguinis & Roth, 2003, p.16). Accomplishing goals as well as economic and reputational success is achieved by demonstrating one’s obedience and love for the family, by providing meritorious civic service, by passing the civil service examinations, and by entering into the official bureaucracy (Aguinis & Roth, 2003, p.17). According to Fairbanks and Goldman (1998), this type of educational tradition stresses duties rather than rights. Yu (1996) refers to this as the “social orientation achievement motivation” or SOAM (Aguinis & Roth, 2003, p.16).<sup>9</sup>

The arts and sciences in a cultural context would make the family, the community as well as the importance of reputation, cultural knowledge and heritage, ethical behavior, duty and character building as its goals.

## **The Arts and Sciences in a Spiritual Context**

From the Greeks to the Chinese societies of the fifth century and not to be

overtaken by antiquity, Indian Civilization can, like the Chinese, offer an alternative construct of the arts and sciences.<sup>10</sup> As the Greeks situate freedom in the political, the Chinese in the cultural, the Indians saw it in the spiritual.

In the Indian context, the real self, called *atman* (soul), becomes goal directed. There exists in every living being a thirst for limitlessness (freedom) (Inayatullah, 2000; Ananda Mitra Ac, 1998). This thirst for limitlessness occurs in the physical, the mental and the spiritual. The satiation of this limitlessness, however, is not possible in the physical and the mental but can only occur in the transcendental (Sarkar, 1978). Thus, the liberation from the bondages of desire (physical), ignorance (intellectual), and darkness (spiritual) requires the understanding of the real self - the self that is attracted to something Greater than he/she (the individual) is. The understanding of the transcendental self is the center-piece of the Indian liberal arts project (Polite, 2011), and as the ultimate goal of human life (Inayatullah, 2000)

Table 1. *Western and non-western liberal arts, arts and sciences contexts, purposes and goals*

GREEK CONTEXT (LIBERAL ARTS)	CHINESE CONTEXT (THE ARTS AND SCIENCES)	INDIAN CONTEXT (THE ARTS AND SCIENCES)	ISLAMIC CONTEXT (THE ARTS AND SCIENCES)
Individual/Self-Interest Political leadership Democratic culture Freedom Right	Collective/Community Civil Service Wealth creation Cultural heritage Cultural traditions Character building Duty	Individual/Collective Spiritual leadership Enlightenment Expansion of consciousness Rationality Conscience Devotion Self-Realization	Individual/Collective Royal authority Kingship Group unity Spiritual Identity Kinship Ethics Discipline Bravery

To be rational, in the Indian lens, is to be spiritual in all levels of existence and to be human is to live according to the dictates of what is human (*dharma*), to recognize the permanent and impermanent, to know that the spiritually constructed self is social in nature as all selves are interpenetrated with each other (Inayatullah, 2000). Hence, an individual has a duty to respect the consciousness of others and promote human welfare in the context of selfless service (*seva*); it's tolerance to different realities and truths. The individual then is nested in a family on a collective journey through life (*samaj*) (Sarkar, 1983). Additionally, the attraction towards the Great (*bhakti*) would be the motivation behind man's internal (moral, cultural) and external (social, political, economic) struggles.

While the Greeks train their subjects with rhetorical skills, argumentation, and debate, and the Chinese train by way of memorizing, writing and reading classical, literature, poetry and humanists' texts, and knowing virtue, the Indian path is through congregating, reading scriptural texts, meditating (mantras), and practicing yoga with the guidance of a Guru. The goal of learning from within and without was enlightenment, and that through the practice of expanding consciousness (reading spiritual texts, meditation, yoga exercises) comes spiritual leadership – the self (individual) asserting, sacrificing spirit for the welfare of others (collective).

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the many Indian thinkers and spiritual leaders who were molded through this method of education. He embodies the Indian liberal arts tradition:

*“What I want to achieve - what I have been striving and pinning to achieve these 30 years – is self-realization, to see God face-to-face, to attain Moksha (roughly defined as oneness with God)....All I do by way of speaking and writing and all my ventures in the political field, are directed in the same end.” (Gardner, 1993, p.333)*

In the same manner, PR Sarkar, a macrohistorian, a Guru himself and social philosopher, emphasize spirituality as a base:

*“Spirituality provides humanity with that subtle and tremendous power with which no other power can be compared. Therefore, with spirituality as the base, a rational philosophy should be evolved to deal with the physical, psychological, and socio-philosophical problems of the day.” (Sarkar, <http://www.thoughtsof.prsarkar.com/a-subtle-power/>)*

The Indian view argues that while the rational is real, it leads us to the spiritual. The maximization of an individual as an agent for collective happiness and minimization of pain is an end goal (Inayatullah, 2000). Here, liberal arts can be reinterpreted and redefined in the context of the spiritual, which is needed in understanding oneself as well as in advancing the welfare of others to reduce human suffering. Thus, creating spiritual leadership, developing rationality in the context of the transcendental and the universal, and awakening one’s conscience becomes the goal of liberal arts education.

## **The Islamic Story**

Like the Chinese, the Indians and the Greeks, the Muslims also have their own view of reality, of man and reason. While the Greeks are motivated by the culture of Wars (Connor, 1998), the Chinese of the need to unify heaven and the earth (Zhao, 2009), the Indians the necessity to merge the individual self with the Supreme self (Inayatullah, 2000), the Muslims would find their meaning, their purpose, their identity in the desert (Inayatullah, 2000). Islam as a religion as an integrative worldview (Sardar, 2008) provides them with a moral and ethical framework, which is the foundation for Muslim education, knowledge, and scholarship.<sup>11</sup>

The Muslim view places man in the context of environmental adversities, dependent on his physical environment to sustain life (Inayatullah, 2000) and the Bedouin nomad, which is the ideal person in nature (Khalidun, 1967). The Bedouin’s beginnings, his courage, his resourcefulness, his heroism, his fearlessness and struggles, his desert toughness and qualities (Inayatullah, 2000), along with Islam, inspire the Muslim story of the arts and sciences.

Specifically, the writings of Ibn Khaldun suggest that the indigenous concept of *Asabiya* must be central to the Muslim’s narrative of history and political education.<sup>12</sup> Writing on Ibn Khaldun’s theory of history, Inayatullah (2000) highlights that group feeling, group unity is essential if people are to understand the

dynamics of a Muslim society. It is by learning the laws of group unity that Muslim history and society can be understood, as the laws of group identity are the laws of history (Inayatullah, 1999; Khaldun, 1967). As such, the Muslim must learn this by heart, and Islam as a religion offers a spiritual identity and perspective as well as a source of inspiration and hope. Inayatullah (2009) adds that learning the dynamics, the rise and fall of dynasties, of groups, of royalty and the role of the divine would be imperative in strengthening the collective identity that strengthens group unity.

Moreover, Muslim must learn that respect to parental authority, strong kinship ties, bravery, morality and ethics, all essential in solidifying group unity. This group unity emerging from kinship leads to kingship or royal authority. Royal authority in the Muslim context is understood as a means to strengthen social cohesion to avoid groups from fighting. In his words, “the king must dominate them and have power and authority over them so that none of them will attack one another. This is the meaning of royal authority” (Inayatullah, 2000, p.204; Khaldun, 1997, p.67).

Group unity, history, inclusiveness, kinship, respect for parental authority, royal authority, Islam, ethics, and choice are essential in the Muslim context of the arts and sciences.<sup>13</sup> For the Muslim mind, freedom is only experienced in the context of man’s nature to expand through group feelings and group identification. Islam as a religion would become an integrative worldview and ethic which provides meaning and transcendental inspiration to fortify Muslim fraternity, solidarity, and brotherhood.<sup>14</sup>

## The Futures of Liberal Arts

This discussion on the multiple realities and perspectives running across a plurality of liberal arts contexts also indicates the possibilities and opportunities of their futures that encompass their resurgence, explored here.

According to Connor (1998) liberal education, regardless of how we define it, and whatever we may call it, is in trouble today. The seismic shift in enrollment patterns, majors, faculty positions, compensation, prestige, and choices have caused the recent decline of liberal arts in recent years. Humanities are performing dismally against computer and information technology sciences, health professions, public administration, and business management (Engell, & Dangerfield, 1998). Similarly, it was reputed that research support for the humanities has dwindled. In 1960, for example, one of every six faculty members professed the liberal arts, however, in 1988, one of 13 opted to engage (Connor, 1998). This was a consequence of a weakened teaching staff in the humanities faculties which led to less prepared students. Lower salary of the faculty coupled with heavy teaching load and limited opportunities exacerbated the decline of research (Connor, 1998). Such trends make possible the extinction of liberal arts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In support, Brian Rosenberg (2009) predicted that in 10 to 15 years, there will even be fewer liberal arts institutions and colleges.

The slow abandonment of liberal arts traditions in favor of a more professional orientation is seen as a potential threat, demise - to innovation that nurtured generations of leaders, scholars, and social critics. This trend is becoming more apparent as more students are encouraged to pursue programs which prepare them for a career that could provide an immediate paycheck.

## Liberal Art 2.0 and Workplace Trends

With the downturn of the liberal arts is it safe to assume that it's on the way out? Fortunately, the answer is a loud NO. Many academics and CEOs are one in unison saying a resurgence is about to happen and effort is currently under way. Why? What's the fuss about the liberal arts suddenly surging again?

In an article by the Forbes Magazine (2009), the decline in the conceptual abilities of graduates was highlighted. The shortage and decline of talent capable of big-picture thinking, real world applications, multi-skilled, dynamic and creative manpower has forced people to assess what has gone wrong. It was found that poor and incoherent courses in liberal arts among graduates were the culprit. Employers now see the difference between graduates who benefited from a quality liberal education and those who left college with narrow exposure to it (Schneider, 2009). As such, employers in close coordination with universities are demanding that colleges should spend more time teaching students how to analyze, integrate and apply their learning to new challenges and settings (Schneider, 2009). They believe that the rapidly changing workplace prompts a bigger demand for a well-rounded education (Roger, 2000).

As the West attempts to renew Liberal Arts, industry and academia is increasingly critically engaged through organized forums, conferences, and other initiatives to explore a liberal arts design relevant to contemporary life. The effort within the West, the US in particular, has created a thread to form a new liberal arts discourse. Their narrative aims to underline the transformative power of humanities in preparing students' mind to compete in a flexible knowledge based economy. To do this, a generation of so-called digital natives, professors, students, artists, corporatists and activists has sought to revive a failing liberal arts tradition and popularized the phrase Liberal Arts 2.0 (Kottke, 2009; Baird, 2008). Snarkmarket.com, Carnegie.org, NITLE.org, the newatlantis.com are four of the thousand sites actively engaged, networking, tagging, and podcasting information to encourage participation in the construction of the new liberal arts.

The Liberal Arts 2.0 agenda seeks to develop a body of learning that is durable as the ancient liberal arts version and suggests the full integration of digital tools in the construction of the new liberal arts. Hence, the "Web 2.0 and all that it implies", as Baird noted (2008) "will necessitate a revision of the way we do liberal arts."

In 2009, a group of bloggers set up an open source community with the idea to facilitate a big collaborative effort to identify the gist of 21<sup>st</sup> century liberal arts. The aim was to generate an imaginary course catalogue that was "smart, provocative, insightful, surprising and/or funny" (Millar, 2009). Spearheaded by Snarkmarket.com, the project generated 21 initial courses suggested by bloggers, self-appointed Web-based deep thinkers and new media types. It proposed the inclusion of courses like micro-politics, coding and decoding, attention economics, creativity, mapping, myth and magic, negotiation, reality engineering, translation and video literacy, etc. for Liberal Arts 2.0.<sup>15</sup> The contributors argued that "over the past 15 years, the internet has profoundly and increasingly changed the way we live and learn" (Sloan, 2009) and as "we have new responsibilities now, as employees, citizens, and friends, we need to have new capabilities too, the new liberal arts must equip us for a world like this" (Sloan, 2009).<sup>16</sup> This Liberal Arts 2.0 course catalogue was built with particular attention to the future and to what the future will be like.

Many Western, in particular US based liberal arts advocates agree that traditional liberal arts practices need to be modified. The 2011 National Institution for Technology in Liberal Education (NITLE) Summit reported that digital technologies and the Internet have changed the way knowledge is created and shared. The report also noted the effect of recent recessionary pressures and the sustainability of the core business model for liberal arts education. They said that these concerns put liberal arts education at risk. Hence, they sought to develop open innovation business models and learning environment for liberal arts to thrive in a technology-saturated world. The NITLE 2011 summit, a new annual event for the liberal arts, resolved to facilitate research support and help colleges experiment with new liberal arts models and strategic partnerships to encourage the development of a shared discourse between liberal arts colleges and other stakeholders in liberal arts education.

### Futures of China’s Liberal Arts

When Chinese Vice Minister of Education Wu Quidi spoke on the future of education, he asserted that arts and sciences will play an important role in nurturing creative and independent thinking (Friedman, 2007). As such, the Chinese government has been sending a lot of students to learn liberal arts in the US. Over a couple of years, applications from China to

Table 2. *Foundations of liberal arts 2.0 and 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace trends*

LIBERAL ARTS 2.0 FOUNDATION	21 <sup>ST</sup> CENTURY WORKERS / WORKPLACE TRENDS
Guarantees the qualities of 21 <sup>st</sup> century workers Much more valuable in the 21 <sup>st</sup> century Multidisciplinary Horizontal Flat-form of education Well Rounded Multi-skilled Multilingual Diverse Strong foundation in critical and creative thinking Building block of so much knowledge Independent thinking Strong foundation on oral and written communication Strong foundation on abstraction Flexible Artsy Learning Web-based, Digital, Wired, Wireless, Open Innovation Cultural Spiritual Awareness Going Global, Going Liberal Arts Myth Local is essential	Big-Picture Thinking Real World applications Multi-skilled Creative Intellectual flexibility Skill in self-expression (oral and written) Universal understanding of diversity Concepts Adaptability Leadership Collaboration High concepts High touch Innovation Technology

US liberal arts colleges have significantly risen. Bowdoin College, an elite

liberal arts college in the US, for example now has 300 student-applicants a year, compared with 100 two years earlier (Duncan, 2010). This trend has spurred a debate in China about what National Universities should be teaching as the country needs a workforce with skills and creativity to help move away from low-cost manufacturing and, in economic terms, move up the value chain (Duncan, 2010). As many employers in China believe that liberal arts graduates perform better over the long-run, Chinese professors are constantly debating on how to localize the country's liberal arts program to ensure 'return on ideas', sustain the economy and advance technological growth in China. Professor Liu Chang, a history professor at East China Normal University in Shanghai, articulated that: "In a modern society, every Chinese needs liberal arts – history, literature, science, philosophy, morality. To be a good citizen you need to get this education" (Duncan, 2010). They, however, see the world differently, hence, aspire to teach their brightest young people and develop a liberal arts that is unique and adjusted to their needs.

With China's cultural inclination, the future of liberal arts in that country may ignite the resurgence of Confucian ideas and teachings, as well as the study of the Chinese classics and literature. In fact, the study of Herman Aguinis and Heidi Roth (2003) on the teaching methods and culture based instructional challenges in China suggested that Confucian orientation defining scholarship and other cultural traits is essential in Chinese education. It must emphasize the teaching of respect for parental authority and figures, moral virtue and even the classics. Likewise, in a recent article featuring a prominent Chinese university offering the first liberal arts program in China has recently designed a curriculum giving lesser importance to politics but heavier weight to poetry and the Chinese classics. Teaching the young about the importance of providing the best care for the elderly was one of the primordial objectives of the university (Hvistendhal, 2010). That runs parallel with the assertion made by Chen Yongfang (2009) in *A True Liberal Arts Education*, that liberal arts education must be based on a commitment to nurturing skills for life and fostering one's identity rather than for just the workplace.

Furthermore, a few of China's top universities have begun experimenting with several aspects of liberal arts education. Professor Gan Yang of Shanghai Fudan University for instance is leading the experiment with the hope of developing more socially-engaged thinkers than instant billionaires (Duncan, 2010). Likewise, Shi Jian (2011), Vice-President of Sichuan University, whose words resonate with many Chinese university leaders, said "the Chinese liberal arts education pays attention to civic engagement and focus on the responsibility of our graduates have as 21<sup>st</sup> century world citizens, to their families and to society" (Ford, 2011).

Civic engagement, the family, rebuilding of local communities, the teaching of 'great learning' that include Chinese classics, history, philosophy, geography, environmental studies, and the adaption of the 'great books' model using cross-disciplinary approaches that emphasize the readings of original texts of writers such as Plato, Kant, Goethe, and Marx among others are given extensive focus (Ford, 2011). Cao Li, vice-director of the liberal arts centre at Tsinghua University, said that the growing interest in the liberal arts is a response to the increasing openness of China and a way to meet both the challenges and opportunities of globalization (Ford, 2011).

## India's Awakening

"India has woken up and smelt the coffee. Move over science and technology the Indian diaspora is realizing the worth of a solid liberal arts degree" (Polite, 2010). This is the emerging discourse among leaders of Indian Higher Education.

While the US and UK are continually cutting budgets for humanities and the social sciences, India is allocating funds and recruiting people to join the academe so that they can exclusively dedicate themselves to humanities and the social sciences (Polite, 2010). The Indian Government established its first liberal arts university to realize that purpose in 2008. In 2010, Ananda Mahindra, vice-chairman and MD of Mahindra and Mahindra, offered \$10 million dollars endowment to Harvard University Humanities Center to bolster the study of liberal arts. The donation was made to sustain the effort of benefactors to put liberal arts universities in India.

Nonetheless, this Indian liberal arts initiative does not want to duplicate the West and prefers a different approach to liberal arts education. According to Ashok Nagdal, Dean, School of Human Studies, the Indian initiative favors methods that begins with 'ourselves' and borrow the perspectives of current Indian thinkers such as Ashis Nandy, Sudhir Kakkar and R.C. Kapoor as a starting point (Polite, 2010). To Arthur Rodney (2011), India has a lot of liberal education philosophies in its bookshelf. He said that India's two streams of education discourse, Sanskrit and Persian, offer a broad spectrum of liberal knowledge that encourages argumentation and critical thinking. Likewise, Amartya Sen (2005), articulated in the *Argumentative Indian* – that there are many elements in Indian traditions, both Hindu and Muslim, that evince a similar love for contestation and argument.

In her study on democracy and the liberal arts, Martha Nussbaum (2011, p.771) praised the fullness of the Indian liberal arts tradition and featured the Tagorean model of liberal arts and other like-minded Indian educators with a distinctive method of curricular ideas as a practical alternative in the construction of the new liberal arts model (Nussbaum, 2011, p.735-773). She said that the breadth and depth of the Indian view that encourage critical engagement also promotes democratic pluralism and global citizenship. In curricular terms, the Tagorean model expands the liberal arts to include global citizenship, cultivation of sympathy, learning and immersion through cross-cultural experience, diversity, inclusive sympathy, nurturing imagination through the arts, Socratic self-criticism, allegiance to the moral law, accountability, and cultivating the 'inner eyes'. She said the "Tagore's approach was in a sense Universalist, and yet it required each person to pursue their goal using their characteristic traditions and achievements" (Nussbaum, 2011, p.750). However, in today's India, "the Tagore model exerts little influence" added Nussbaum. The ardent drive for commercial success is limiting the radiance of the Indian liberal arts project. She said that the longstanding Indian liberal arts tradition deserves our praise and argued that it is the example of the Indian liberal arts experiment, in particular Tagore's humanist project that we should all be imitating (Nussbaum, 2011).

India today, in partnership with US based liberal arts colleges is working to create its own brand of liberal arts college (Needham, 2008).<sup>17</sup> Their aim was to develop distinctive and enlivening pedagogies to encourage the young population to pursue liberal arts. The Indian government and the private sector have realized this and signaled to provide a thoroughgoing support to intensify development in the

humanities.

## The Islamic World Initiative: Seeking Synthesis

While liberal arts education remains a tough sell in the Muslim world partly due to its American influence and the Enlightenment, a couple of liberal arts initiatives are under way. In fact, the challenge of integrating liberal arts education in the Islamic world was the subject of an international dialogue of independent universities in the Muslim world held in Turkey in 2007. Notable higher education experts in the Islamic world came to discuss the future of liberal arts education in Muslim countries. They took note of the necessity to access the liberal arts tradition. Inasmuch as the method and content of liberal arts education was crucial in the dialogue the proponents agreed that liberal arts education must be sensitive to Islam, being the dominant cultural influence. With this, living and learning liberal arts in Muslim countries would mean emphases on critical thinking without becoming American or Western, as the core of the pedagogy would be crucial. The dialogue also recognized Ibn Khaldun's scholarship and theory of history, which can be studied as 'part of the human story' in addition to the Greek story. Additionally, Islamic history can be taught alongside Greek and Roman history to minimize the consequence of explicitly distinguishing Islamic and non-Islamic history.

In his article on Science in Islamic Philosophy, Zia Sardar (1998) noted the ways by which Muslim polymaths of the second and eighth centuries dealt with the arts and sciences. He said that their approach to scientific inquiry synthesizes reason and revelation, knowledge and values and did not recognize disciplinary boundaries between the 'two cultures' of science and humanities. Knowledge acquired through rational thinking and through the Quran was seen as complementary and that both are 'signs of God' that enable humanity to study and understand nature. The Quran describing the virtues of reason and scientific pursuit are in Islam a form of worship. "*Scientists and scholars such as Ibn al-Haytham, al-Razi, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Sina and al-Biruni superimposed Plato's and Aristotle's ideas of reason and objectivity on their own Muslim faith*" writes Sardar (1998). Thus, "reason and revelation are complementary and integrated methods for the pursuit of truth" (Sardar, 1998). By unifying the arts and sciences, by combining metaphysics, epistemology and scientific inquiry, the Muslim polymath triggered the explosion of 'scientific spirit' and produced "a unique synthesis of religion and philosophy" (Sardar, 1998). This quest for truth has led to numerous discoveries and innovations when Muslim civilization was at its zenith (Sardar, 1998).

As Muslim scholars tend to unite the arts (rational thinking and the Quran) and the sciences (scientific inquiry) it is possible that the values nurtured in the past are recovered and the notion of 'tradition' and the 'sacred' (Sufism) and the values reflective of Muslim society such as *tawhid* (unity), *khilafa* (trusteeship), *ibada* (worship), *ilm* (knowledge), *halal* (praiseworthy) and *haram* (blameworthy), *adl* (justice) and *zulm* (tyranny), and *istisla* (public interest) and *dhiya* (waste) are integrated as the core of the Muslim arts and sciences. Private Islamic universities in predominantly Muslim countries are taking the lead and are getting substantial support from leading American and European educational institutions.

## Conclusion

Apparently, the future of liberal arts is everyone's concern. Competing cultures and civilizations want to have a piece of it, as some if not all, higher education experts, CEOs and leaders have acknowledged the significance of liberal arts education to sustain innovation, economic growth, and human development.

The Western liberal arts constructed in a neo-liberal fashion giving emphasis on its usefulness to the workplace is just one part of the story. There are other stories and culturally diverse liberal arts futures are now emerging. Likewise, the awakening of India and the urgency of liberal arts in the Indian story, where the arts is not just that of technicians and accountants is also a compelling story. India thinks that liberal arts education is a must if its citizens are to rescue humanity's creative DNA. China also wants a liberal arts futures that emphasize wealth creation by redefining scholarship in the context of the community and by preserving deep-rooted ancient cultural treasures and identity. Hence, a commitment to nurture skills for life and to foster one's identity rather than blindly respond to workplace demands (Cheng, 2009).

Many non-Western academics think the decline is exclusive to the West as manifested by constant cuts in budget for research, academic positions, funding as well by dwindling interest of its young people and their parents to the liberal arts programs. This led to a decline in creativity and innovation in the workplace primarily in the US.

On the contrary, non-Western universities are seeing a different pattern altogether as China, India, Pakistan and other Muslim-predominant countries like Kuwait, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are actively engaged by increasing their budget and academic support to liberal arts initiatives. The private sector is getting more aggressive by advancing liberal arts education and redesigning it in a way that is flexible to and yet compatible with local culture, frameworks and values.

Many scholars believe that liberal arts is now a culture-bound term. In fact, a reverse engineering is taking place as one Indian scholar puts it: liberal arts is continually being localized and customized in a way that is more fluid, diverse and dynamic, and that a smart, local student would opt to have as education. The usefulness of liberal arts education becomes contextual; many want it corporate while others want it more civilizational and digital-oriented.

Nonetheless, the future of liberal arts will not be a 'one-size-one-future-fits all idea' and it will take time before the world concedes to the true attributes of the discipline as it remains relatively unattractive to many who are seeking certainty in life and utility in their educations (Berrett, 2011). The western liberal arts model as many western liberal arts advocates argue, remains the most practical model insisting that it should be framed based on the employability of future graduates in order to boost its economic utility (Berrett, 2011). Many proponents remain optimistic about this future of liberal arts education. Many non-Western academics insist that it should be more than that. For them, they envision a liberal arts future that is culture bound, contextual, diverse, pluralistic, community oriented, less political but more civilizational.

## Notes

1. James Ogilvy writes that "human freedom is largely a matter of imagining alternative futures and then choosing among them." For more discussion see James

Ogilvy (2010, p.5-65).

2. Peter Bishop argued that the implications of change on the unfolding future require us to look “more widely, more deeply, and longer” into the future. See Peter Bishop (2010, p. 99-106).
3. Etymologically, the word liberal is related to the Greek word *eleutheros*, Latin word *liber* meaning “free”. Akin to the Old English word “*leodan*” meaning “to grow” and the Sanskrit word “*rodhati*”, meaning “one climbs,” and “one grows”.
4. “The earliest American universities had as their goal to make students rational and civically engaged. Its European counterparts, however, emphasized professional and technical education. There was great resistance to adding science programs to a liberal arts school. As a compromise, Yale University created the Bachelor’s of Science degree as an inferior version of the established Bachelor’s of Arts degree.”
5. For this paper, Western civilization is defined as societies and cultures that are heavily influenced by Greco-Roman way of life, ideas, and traditions, individualism and freedom of choice. Non-Western civilizations refer to societies with a high regard for collectivism. The family, the village, the community, the spiritual and cultural traditions, the environment are strong variables in shaping their perspectives of the rationale as well as freedom and freedom of choice.
6. To Johann Galtung education is the means by which cultural context are inculcated in the individual. For more discussion on education as a symbolic civilizational code, see Johann Galtung (1986, p.1-12).
7. According to Johann Galtung, the Sinic civilization can be conceived as consisting of geological layers – Daoism, Confucianism, Buddhism and with the recent layers at the bottom Christianity, Liberalism and Marxism.
8. According to Agunis and Roth, the family is the prototype of all Chinese social organizations.
9. “SOAM is the motivation to achieve goals set by significant others such as family, community or society, instead of the more individualistic approach by the west to achieve goals set by and for oneself”.
10. According to Johann Galtung, the Indic civilization has both occidental (Western) and oriental (Non-western) aspects, hence, eclectic and additive by nature. For more discussion see Johann Galtung (1980).
11. “Islam is not so much a religion but an integrative worldview: that is to say, it integrates all aspects of reality by providing a moral perspective on every aspect of human endeavour. “ See Zia Sardar (2002).
12. Group unity is defined as the fiber or sinew by which a group is held together and binds people into effective groups. See Sohail Inayatullah (1999, p.51-64).
13. Hakon Stan writes “Seek ye learning, though be it in China” admonished the Prophet. So the Arabs did. Some 30 Academy Schools were established in Baghdad. The alphabet, the paper, and Arabic numerals transmitted learning that inspired the European Renaissance are evidence of a strong and vibrant arts and sciences tradition in Islamic civilization.” For more discussion see Hakon Stan (1965).

14. To Hakon Stan, every detail of Arabic speaking life and other adepts in Africa and Asia is regulated by Islamic tradition.
15. According to Sohail Inayatullah “technology and the open content movement will play a bigger role in the way knowledge is constituted, learned, shared and acquired. The rise of the Web as a knowledge platform will trigger “more diversity in knowledge regimes and that pedagogy will keep on jumping the boundaries of the real into differently real.” See Sohail Inayatullah (2011, p.9)
16. Snarkmarket. com argued for the expansion and reinvigoration of liberal arts. The notion of the new liberal arts must be responsive to the needs of the so-called digital natives.
17. The Yale India Initiative boasts a \$75-million endowment dedicated to the growth of faculty and curricular program in Indian studies at Yale.

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