

Going multi disciplinary through liberal studies the ODL way

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Going Multi Disciplinary Through Liberal Studies The ODL Way

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ABSTRACT

The focus of a liberal education is on civilizing of an individual's life purposes, the refining of emotional reactions, and the maturing of understanding of the nature of things according to the best of our time (Adapted Gasset, 1946, p.1). A World Bank Task Force member describes a liberally educated person as someone who can think and write clearly, effectively, and critically; communicate with precision, cogency, and force; has a critical appreciation of the ways in which knowledge is gained and understanding of the universe, of society, and of self; has a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times, and is able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it; has some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems; and has achieved depth in some field of knowledge. The Wawasan Open University has taken a bold and dynamic step in this direction with a vision to return the renaissance to education and lifelong learning through open and distance learning of liberal studies. This paper will briefly discuss liberal studies as a means to achieving new heights in multi disciplinary knowledge for Malaysians.

Keywords: Liberal studies, liberal education, liberal studies through open and distance learning, liberal studies as multi disciplinary knowledge, liberal studies and lifelong learning.

INTRODUCTION

The Association of American Colleges and Universities (1998) describes liberal learning as not being confined to any particular field of study but providing substantial content, a rigorous methodology and an active engagement with societal, ethical, and practical implications of one's learning. Therefore, what is required in a liberal education tradition is that one understands the foundations of knowledge and inquiry about nature, culture and society as well as master core skills of perception, analysis, and expression to enable one to cultivate a respect for truth, recognize the importance of historical and cultural context, and also to allow one to explore connections among formal learning, citizenship, and service to communities.

St. John's College freshman Graham Gallagher (2009) rightly pointed out that learning is not a competition but a journey. Academics are of the view that the emphasis on narrow specialization in colleges had harmed the quality of higher education by failing to expose students to the tradition of broad cross-disciplinary learning. The president of St. John's College in the US, Christopher Nelson is of the opinion that people think that in a bad

economy they need skills for a job and fail to realize that “a Liberal Arts education will give them skills for life and that will get them a job”.

Underpinning this understanding of liberal studies lies dormant a plethora of notions of knowledge, skills, and attitudes sadly underplayed in most curricula at present. However, cognizant of this potential, the Wawasan Open University took a bold and dynamic step to offer a programme of study leading to a Bachelor's Degree in Liberal Studies. The programme structure has the *Matapelajaran Wajib (MPW)* Courses, University Compulsory Courses, Core Courses (General Education), Free Elective Courses (Social Sciences) and Free Elective Courses (Humanities). The vision of this move is to return the renaissance to education and lifelong learning through the open and distance learning mode. Why pursue liberal studies and what are the benefits of liberal studies?

BENEFITS OF LIBERAL STUDIES

According to the World Bank Task Force on Higher Education and Society (2000, p.83) liberal studies is an excellent form of preparation for the flexible, knowledge-based careers that increasingly dominate the upper tiers of the modern labour force as the ability to learn will continue to provide valuable insurance against the vagaries of a rapidly changing economic environment.

Given the variety of opinions regarding the characteristics of a liberally educated person the Task Force (2000, p.84) describes such a person as someone who:

- can think and write clearly, effectively, and critically, and who can communicate with precision, cogency; and force;
- has a critical appreciation of the ways in which we gain knowledge and understanding of the universe, of society, and of ourselves;
- has a broad knowledge of other cultures and other times, and is able to make decisions based on reference to the wider world and to the historical forces that have shaped it;
- has some understanding of and experience in thinking systematically about moral and ethical problems; and
- has achieved depth in some field of knowledge.

Furthermore, the benefits of liberal studies also include the following:

Teaches One How To Think

According to Harris (1991) thinking has its own grammar, therefore, the mind if trained and exposed to various areas like Literature or Psychology or Sociology or Management will be better able to process learning in other areas as well as the learners develop an ordered mind that sorts an orderly structure and a set of rules for use. Using these mind tools one will be able to demonstrate the structure of thought and knowledge and intellectual movement, and will create the habit of organized thinking and rational analysis thus giving rise to organized solutions, hierarchical procedures, and rational solutions that can be applied to any endeavour (Harris, 1991). What are considered difficult to do at the beginning become easier as attention and concentration, ability to follow arguments and distinguish the important from the trivial as well as grasp concepts are applied to various areas of study and map the links to better understanding. This makes learning more meaningful and relevant. It follows then that once learners have developed good thinking habits they will be able to perform better in any job concomitantly reducing stress leading to a happier life.

Develops Independent Thinking

The diverse corpus of knowledge gained from liberal studies together with the mind tools will enable learners to form their own opinions, attitudes, values based on sound information augmented by evidence and examination and not based on prejudice or ignorance.

Understand The World Better

An understanding of a wide range of subjects will only enhance one's understanding of the world better. It is claimed that a wide ranging education covering from biology to history to human nature will provide the tools for understanding and making better meaning of the phenomena in this world.

Teaches One How To Learn

Liberal Studies tradition mirrors college as providing a telescope and not merely an open and closed book. Moreover, the more one learns, the more one can learn as old knowledge clarifies new knowledge. Notwithstanding, general knowledge enhances creativity where the interactions of diversified knowledge can result in a range of innovation.

Allows One To See Things Whole

Liberal Studies provides a context for all knowledge in the sense that it allows one to see that all knowledge is a unified wholeness and every field of study is a part of the whole or a partitioning of this unified knowledge. As pointed out by John Henry Newman (1991) an overemphasis on any one field of study tends to distort reality. To quote an armchair philosopher: "When the only tool you have is a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail". An all rounded education as in the liberal studies tradition provides a map of the universe where a systematic view provides better understanding of hierarchies and relationships for a more sane and orderly life.

Enhances Wisdom And Faith

General knowledge leads to wisdom and informed choices to enhance one's life as a whole, thus making one a better person. Philosophers have repeated over time that knowledge will lead one away from a state of infatuation to one of being able to make worthy considerations.

Makes One A Better Teacher

Liberal Studies is not to be confused with becoming a school teacher but what is meant here is the notion that one communicates cohesively and coherently in whatever situation. A liberal studies background prepares one to engage better without imposing or becoming dogmatic. Instead one is able to reason and be objective in examining issues in discussions bringing to the discussion a level-headed approach.

Contributes To One's Happiness

Liberal Studies cultivates the mind and a cultivated mind enjoys itself as well as the arts and knowledge makes one smarter and supposedly happier.

ROLE OF WAWASAN OPEN UNIVERSITY IN PROMOTING MULTI-DISCIPLINARY KNOWLEDGE

Vision, Mission, And Values

The Wawasan Open University (WOU) is Malaysia's first private not -for-profit tertiary institution dedicated to adult learners. It is a people's university funded by the Wawasan Education foundation and provides tertiary educational opportunities through open and distance learning.

Its vision is to be a vibrant learning community that inspires learning, supports innovation and nurtures all-round personal growth.

The mission is to commit to the expansion of opportunities in higher education and to teaching excellence aimed at increasing the level of knowledge and scholarship among all Malaysians (Student Handbook, 2009, p.8).

The Wawasan Open University believes that one has the potential to develop to the fullest, in line with the cherished noble values shared thereby believing in:

- Upholding high institutional standards
- Celebrating the diversity of our students
- Recognizing our employees
- Valuing citizens and community
- Academic freedom and fairness (Staff Handbook, 2009, para. 2.1)

The School of Foundation and Liberal Studies at the Wawasan Open University offers the degree programme in Liberal Studies where upon successful completion of the requirements for graduation students will be awarded the Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Studies (Hons). This programme commenced in January 2009 and as shown in Table 1 there are currently 159 students pursuing Liberal Studies spread over the seven Regional Offices in Malaysia.

Table 1: Number of Students by Regional Office

Regional Office	KL	BU	PG	IPOH	JB	KB	KC	Total
Jan 2009 Semester	8	0	12	17	15	2		54
July 2009 Semester	5	7	7	7	16	15		57
Jan 2010 Semester	8	3	12	2	11	5	7	48

Source: ITS, WOU, As of 25 Jan 2010

Interestingly of this total number of students engaged in learning via the open and distance learning mode with the Wawasan Open University, the majority are female as shown in Tables 2(a) and 2(b).

Table 2(a): Number of Students by Gender

RO	KL		BU		PG		IPOH		JB		KB		KC	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Jan 2009 Semester	3	5	0	0	3	9	6	11	8	7	1	1	-	-
July 2009 Semester	3	2	2	5	2	5	1	6	4	12	2	13	-	-
Jan 2010 Semester	3	5	0	3	2	10	0	2	4	7	2	3	2	5
	9	12	2	8	7	24	7	19	16	26	5	17	2	5

(M) Male (F) Female

Table 2(b): Total Number of Male and Female Students

Female	Male	Total
111	48	159

Whilst it is encouraging that about one-third of the total number of students pursuing the Liberal Studies programme is male, there are more female students who are availing themselves of the opportunity to further their studies not only because open and distance learning mode suits them better as working adults but also to enhance their soft skills and to be able to determine their own curriculum from the courses offered in the programme. The opportunity provided by the Wawasan Open University in the Liberal Studies programme is unique that having fulfilled the LAN, University core, and programme compulsory courses, students can then determine their own preferences from the courses offered in the Social Science and Humanities clusters for the remaining fifty credits towards graduation. However, there will be those adults who wish to do just some courses without necessarily working for a degree and as such the provision at the Wawasan Open University facilitates such choices as embedded in our vision, mission, and values as well as espoused in the national vision of the nation as a learned 1Malaysia.

As reflected in Table 3, the age of students pursuing the Liberal Studies programme ranges from 21 to 72 years. It is hoped that the programme offered and the mode of study that facilitates learning at any age will see more participation across ages. Our senior student very enthusiastically declared how happy he is to return to learning after all the years of working and grateful for the provision during a student dialogue session.

Table 3: Number of Students by Age

Age	20 - 29	30 - 39	40 - 49	50 - 59	60- 69	70 - 79	Total
	83	44	21	8	2	1	159

Table 4 shows the number of students pursuing Liberal Studies at the Wawasan Open University by occupation. These occupation categories include: those doing their own business, executives, assistant engineers to operational assistants, tutors and part time teachers, nurses, laboratory assistants, army personnel, photographers, sales and marketing personnel, retirees and those not employed.

Table 4: Number of Students by Occupation

Own Business/MD/Director	Executive/Customer Service/Admin Staff	Asst Engineer/ Technician/Multimedia Designer/Production Assistant/Operational Asst	Tutor/ Part Time Teacher	Nurse/Lab Asst	Policeman/Army	Photographer	Sales/Marketing	Retired	Not Employed	Total
21	52	15	15	9	1	1	13	9	23	159

CONCLUSION

There cannot be a more befitting closure to this paper than in the words of John Tusa (2007, pp.7-8) when talking about whether the arts still matter says:

The arts stand naked and without defence in a world where what cannot be measured is not valued; where what cannot be predicted will not be risked; where what cannot be controlled will not be permitted; where whatever cannot deliver a forecast outcome is not undertaken; where what does not belong to all will be allowed to none.

Tusa (2007, p.8) goes on to state further why it matters to revive and sustain the arts and to summarize what he says would be appropriate to refresh and re-register the importance of the liberal arts in the present and for the future. The liberal arts:

- presents a universal view;
- deals with the daily experience in a transforming way;
- questions the way the world is viewed;
- offers different explanations of that world;
- links one to the past and opens the door to the future;
- works beyond the outside routine categories;
- takes one out of oneself;
- makes order out of disorder and stirs up the stagnant;
- offers a shared experience rather than an isolated one;
- encourages the imagination and attempts the pointless;
- offers beauty and confronts one with the fact of ugliness;
- suggests explanations but no solutions;
- presents a vision of integration rather than disintegration;
- forces one to think about the good, bad, false, and true; and
- embraces, expresses, and defines the soul of a civilization.

Therefore, it would seem critical to promote the significance of liberal studies because without the liberal arts a nation would not be talking to itself, not dreaming, and not sustaining an interest in the past and be curious about the future. In a postmodern world, where the individual creativity matters, where personal autonomy is invaluable, the liberal arts environment provides an opportunity for developing these characteristics. Given that the investment in the liberal arts is so small and the actual return large that it represents

immeasurable value for research into sustaining its growth and development. It is hoped that this conference with its appropriate theme to unveil new heights in multidisciplinary knowledge will serve to spearhead the mindset shift required to provide the kind of intellectual impetus required to drive the task forward from preschool through to tertiary levels.

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