

Liberal studies and the emerging ultimate learner

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Liberal Studies and the Emerging Ultimate Learner

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Abstract

Emphasis has always been on good scientific and technical education to enable one to compete in the globalized economy. Martha Nussbaum of the University of Chicago is of the opinion that scientific and technical education addresses one area of concern whilst neglecting the “equally crucial abilities that help ensure the health of all democratic societies and the creation of a decent world culture” (Nussbaum, 2007, p.37). According to Nussbaum (2007, ibid), the abilities associated with the humanities and the arts are equally crucial particularly the ability to think critically, the ability to transcend local loyalties and to approach world problems as a “citizen of the world”, and the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicament of another person. As Nussbaum maintains, an education grounded in these abilities cultivates human beings and their humanity. Asha Kanwar (2010), Vice-President of the Commonwealth of Learning, Vancouver, in her Public Lecture at the Wawasan Open University (WOU) on ICTs in higher education: Who stands to gain? traced the new learner of the 80’s as being “the adult learner who looked for new education, training and/or skills for personal development, promotion, change in career, and/or enhanced job requirements”. The digital native of the 21st century were “technology-savvy learners, usually young school-leavers”. Following on from the new learner and the digital native is the emerging ultimate learner. According to Kanwar (2010, ibid) the ultimate emerging learner is one who “has the means to learn; the mindset and motivation; lifelong learner; and multidisciplinary, analytical, ethical, innovative, disciplined, respectful, and collaborative”. In January 2009 the Wawasan Open University launched the Bachelor of Arts (Hons) in Liberal Studies through its School of Foundation and Liberal Studies. This paper will briefly profile the ODL liberal studies learner at the WOU and discuss cultivating ultimate learners as the way forward.

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. 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.

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 various 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.

Literature on liberal studies says that it teaches one to think and 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 assist 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 progression, 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, *ibid*).

Independent thinking develops with the diverse corpus of knowledge gained from liberal studies and 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.

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.

In teaching one how to learn liberal studies tradition mirrors university 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.

Allowing 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.

General knowledge enhances wisdom and faith leading to informed choices for 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.

Liberal studies makes one a better communicator to be able to communicate 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.

Liberal studies provide opportunities for one to cultivate the mind and a cultivated mind enjoys itself as well as the arts and knowledge makes one smarter and supposedly happier. Tusa (2007, p.8) in summing up the importance of liberal studies in the present and for the future says that it “embraces, expresses, and defines the soul of a civilization”.

The emerging ultimate learner and liberal studies at the Wawasan Open University

Asha Kanwar (2010) traced the 1980’s ‘New Learner’ as the “adult learner who looked for new education, training and/or skills for personal development, promotion, change in career, and /or enhanced job requirements”. She mentioned the coming of the 21st century ‘Digital Native’ comprising “technology-savvy learners, usually young school -leavers” and concluded by hailing the ‘Emerging Ultimate Learner’ who “has the means to learn; the mindset and motivation; lifelong learner; multidisciplinary, analytical, ethical, innovative, disciplined, respectful, and collaborative”. Can this be heralded as the renaissance of liberal studies? The Wawasan Open University’s move to offer an undergraduate programme by the School of Foundation and Liberal Studies leading to the award of a BA (Hons) in Liberal Studies was seen as a bold effort in the desired direction. This programme was launched in January 2009 and is currently into its fourth semester as the semesters at the Wawasan Open University commence in January and July each year.

There are 186 students in total to date comprising 129 (69%) females and 57 (31%) males as shown in Table 1. The number by Regional Office is presented in Table 2.

Table 1: Number of students for January 2009 – July 2010

Female	Male	Total
129 (69%)	57 (31%)	186

Table 2: Number of students for January 2009 – July 2010 by Regional Office

RO	KL	BU	PG	IPOH	JB	KB	KC	Total
Jan 2009	8	0	12	17	15	2	0	54
July 2009	5	7	7	7	16	15	0	57
Jan 2010	8	3	17	2	11	5	7	48
July 2010	4	2	1	1	12	0	7	27
	25	12	32	27	54	22	14	186

KL (Kuala Lumpur); BU (Bandar Utama); PG (Penang); JB (Johor Bahru); KB (Kota Bharu); KC (Kuching).

It was encouraging that the initial intake of students for this programme was 73 with 54 (73%) of the first cohort currently showing active status. The second intake was 63 with 57 (90%) continuing from the second cohort. There were 56 students in the third intake with 48 (86%) showing active status presently in the third cohort. At the last intake, the numbers dropped to 27 as many students migrated from the Liberal Studies programme to the BA (Hons) in Psychology programme offered for the first time by the School in the July 2010 semester. This was an anticipated outcome as many had originally signed up for courses in the Liberal Studies programme drawn by the psychology courses offered in the social sciences cluster. The Liberal Studies programme was first offered in Kuching in January 2010. The breakdown by gender of students is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Number of students for January 2009 – July 2010 by gender and Regional Office

RO	KL		BU		PG		IPOH		JB		KB		KC	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Jan 2009	3	5	0	0	3	9	6	11	8	7	1	1	-	-
July 2009	3	2	2	5	2	5	1	6	4	12	2	13	-	-
Jan 2010	3	5	0	3	2	10	0	2	4	7	2	3	2	5
July 2010	2	2	2	0	0	1	0	1	2	10	0	0	3	4
Total	11	14	4	8	7	25	7	20	18	36	5	17	5	9
Grand Total	25		12		32		27		54		22		14	
186														

Table 3 presents the number of female and male students by Regional Office. Given that the majority are female students, it follows then that there are more female students at every Regional Office (RO). 14 (56%) of the students from the Kuala Lumpur Regional Office are female with 8 (67%) at Bandar Utama RO; 25 (78%) in Penang RO; 20 (74%) in Ipoh RO; 36 (67%) in Johor Bahru RO; 17 (77%) in Kota Bharu RO; and 9 (64%) in Kuching RO. This is perceived as a very positive sign as more female students are availing themselves of the opportunities provided by the Wawasan Open University as well as signing up for the Liberal Studies programme.

Table 4: Number of students for January 2009 – July 2010 by age group

Age Group	20 - 29	30 – 39	40 - 49	50 - 59	60- 69	70 - 79
	96	53	23	10	3	1

Table 4 showing number of students by age for January 2009 to July 2010 has the majority 96 (52%) in the 20-29 age group followed by the 30-39 age group with 53 (28%) of the total number of students. There are 23 (12 %) in the 40-49 age group and 10 (5%) in the 50-59 age group. Just 3 (2%) fall in the 60-69 age group and one student 1 (0.5%) is in the 70-79 age group. During one of the dialogue sessions with the students in Penang, the senior most student in the Liberal Studies programme commented on the opportunity that the Wawasan Open University is providing for him to pursue his studies after a very long break. As a retired person actively engaged in doing voluntary teaching of underprivileged students in the community he finds the courses he is following enhance his knowledge and ability to provide better guidance to his students. The flexibility, affordability and accessibility of the Wawasan Open University with a vision and a mission to bring lifelong learning to all has in itself brought about the long awaited renaissance in education heralding a step closer in the realization process of the emerging ultimate learner. The current emphasis on the importance of soft skills in all jobs has made it all the more crucial for liberal studies courses to be included in the curricula of the various disciplines of study. The over emphasis on technology and business studies has overlooked the holistic approach to the development of an individual and is now becoming evident as the absence of the necessary soft skills impede quality of performance. It is envisaged that the Liberal Studies programme offered by the Wawasan Open University will contribute to the honing of mindsets that will result in learners becoming “multidisciplinary, analytical, ethical, innovative, disciplined, respectful, and collaborative”.

Table 5: Number of students for January 2009 – July 2010 by occupation

Own Business/MD/Director	Executive/ Customer Service/Admin Staff	Asst Engineer/ Technician/ Multimedia Designer/ Production Asst/ Operational Asst	Tutor/ Part Time Teacher	Nurse/ Lab Asst	Policeman/ Army	Photo-grapher	Sales/ Marketing	Retired	Not Employed
23	63	19	17	10	1	2	14	10	27

Table 5 shows the number of students by occupation for the Liberal Studies programme for January 2009 to July 2010. Students fall within a wide range of occupational groups. Of the total, 23 (12%) are engaged in their own business or are managing director or

director; 63 (34%) are in executive positions or in customer service or are administrative staff; 19 (10%) are assistant engineer or technician, multimedia designer, production assistant or operational assistant; 17 (9%) are tutor or part-time teacher; 10 (5%) are working as nurse or laboratory assistant; 1 (0.5%) is from the police and army; 2 (1%) work as photographer; 14 (8%) are in sales or marketing; 10 (5%) are retirees and 27 (15%) are currently not employed.

Conclusion

Having made a monumental conceptual and pedagogical move to offer a liberal studies programme the Wawasan Open University has joined the league of universities where liberal studies is offered as a programme of study. The Wawasan Open University is poised with the challenge of shaping the emerging ultimate learner and as such the challenge is now for the university to find ways to speak authoritatively and constructively to issues of citizenship, service, leadership, and character building through the clusters of courses offered in the programme. As in the case of Butler University where the business and pharmacy curricula would be revamped to integrate liberal study in order to better prepare graduates for their professions, the Wawasan Open University will be looking to enhance the management programme by its Business School to incorporate psychology courses in management. This is the time for integration of liberal studies and professional education, not their divergence is the shape of the future towards realising the emergence of ultimate learners. In conclusion, liberal studies does present a daunting prospect as it requires one to “opening the personality to change and questioning, to the possibility of moving out of the security of one’s comforting habits.” As Martha Nussbaum (2004, p.2) says, “to close one’s inner eyes is comforting; to open them with an educated compassion is difficult and painful. But only an education that reveals our common human strivings and our common human vulnerabilities, challenging us to see the distant truly, can lead us into a world of peace and global cooperation”.

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