



SIM-RMIT graduates, August 23, 2013

THE inauguration of the Yale-NUS College of Liberal Arts on August 27, 2013, signals the strong interest that many young people have for a tertiary education focusing on humanities and other liberal arts studies. With slots available for 150 and yet attracting more than 11,000 applicants for admission, the college sets its sight to educate “citizens of the world”, in the words of its president Dr Pericles Lewis.

Liberal Arts students, he says at the inauguration ceremony, are those “who will have a broad familiarity with the great achievements of human art and science, and will feel that their

responsibilities extend not only to their local communities but also to the betterment of humanity at large”.

In a more specific career context, such an education offers critical thinking and writing skills, appreciation of the arts, and the skill set to set goals in one’s life or in a community group, according to academics in the United States with a strong tradition in liberal education.

Liberal studies yesterday, today

Liberal Arts university education began in Europe during the Medieval era (which ended in the 15th Century) when students were required to master seven arts, comprising Grammar (art of writing), Logic (art of coherent thinking), Rhetoric (art of persuasive speech), Mathematics (art of computing), Music, Astronomy (studying the heavens) and Geometry (measuring the Earth). Once these seven were mastered, the student went on to study Natural Science, Moral Science (i.e. history, politics and law) and theological science (religion and first principles). Finally, the student studied for a profession (usually the priesthood).

Over time, as Science and Technology came to dominate the modern world, tertiary education is now split into several streams. The main streams comprise (a) the hard science, engineering and technical disciplines, (b) social sciences and soft-skill subjects from Anthropology to Economics, Law and Sociology, and (c) a cluster of “leftover” liberal and humanities subjects like literature, history, religion and philosophy.

Universities that are champions of Liberal Arts such as Yale and Harvard offer a broad mix of Arts and Humanities subjects plus a raft of niche specialities from gender studies to Egyptology!

Exaggerated fears about job prospects

As the world economy declines, many countries in the West are turning away from a liberal tertiary education with the perception that it does not offer “employability” skill sets. In the US, for instance, the federal government is concerned about the current decline in enrolment and has commissioned a two-year study, published in June 2013, which addresses the “understandable but exaggerated fears” about job prospects.

The commission says studying the Humanities does have pragmatic values. One of the charts in the report highlights a survey showing that 51 percent of business leaders regard liberal education as “very important,” while 74 percent unequivocally want it for their own children.

Titled “The Heart of the Matter”, the report encourages support for foreign language learning and international study, and notes that China, Singapore and some European nations are currently turning to American-style liberal arts education “as a stimulus to innovation and a source of social cohesion”.

STEM education

However, the general trend today is towards an education that focuses on specific industrial skills training and “practical” subjects in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM).

STEM education is directed at students who wish to become professionals as quickly as possible. It is a way of learning that provides deep technical skills aimed at one industry. An example of a STEM education would be a degree course in Banking and Finance, taken by students who want to enter the finance industry. This form of education is usually delivered in lecture halls rather than in small group tutorials. The cost of setting up and delivering is kept low since there is little or no student-teacher interaction and a class can be more than 100 students at one go.

In Singapore, popular STEM courses are offered in many institutions, such as the Singapore Institute of Management’s partnership programmes that include the University of London, University of Birmingham, RMIT University and the State University of New York at Buffalo. Depending on the permutation and electives, students do get an infusion of Liberal Arts subjects in their STEM programmes.

A STEM education is more affordable at S\$20,000-\$30,000 on average, compared with nearly \$90,000 at Yale-NUS. Although critics say STEM graduates may lack broader knowledge outside their area of study, yet many Human Resource managers are comfortable with these graduates who have job-specific skills as well as life problem-solving and creative skills that they learnt in their foundational module courses.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities conducted a survey of 320 business leaders in January 2013. They found that 74 percent of respondents (mostly CEOs) recommended a 21st-Century liberal education in order to create a more dynamic worker. Also, 95 percent of those surveyed said they look for college graduates who can think clearly and solve problems and be able to translate their ideas with good oral and communication skills. The aim is to hire “task-oriented people who have disciplines in critical thinking”.

The Untouchables

Some Liberal Arts subjects appear overly speculative and impractical. No, we’re not talking divinity or divination, but philosophy, literature, international relations (considering the increased level of transborder conflicts, this field of study seems fruitless), political science and even Egyptology!

Who is more “employable” in the corporate workplace – a graduate majoring in Economics, Banking or Statistics, or one in English Literature, Anthropology or History?

In the US environment, surveys by the Centre on Education and the Workforce at Georgetown University and the US Census Bureau reached the same conclusions: engineering

graduates have the lowest jobless rate, and they make more money than any other graduates. Next are graduates in computer science, mathematics, statistics, business studies, life sciences, and physical sciences. Liberal Arts majors are at the bottom.

Whither Philosophy

Traditionally, Philosophy was regarded as the queen of sciences but today this subject is not only dethroned but is no more than a bystander in the tertiary education scene.

According to Lau Kwong Fook, 59, Associate Lecturer at SIM Global Education, “the reason philosophy is not a popular subject these days is that philosophy is indeed considered an impractical and irrelevant subject for modern times”.

But Kwong Fook, who graduated in Philosophy from the then Singapore University, argues that “this is a mistaken impression of the value of philosophy, but it is an impression that will be extremely difficult to change”. Philosophy is a study of the contest of ideas, and to train in questioning and examining ideas to determine the best possible answers, is a crucial skill set that is valuable in any career, he adds. says Kwong Fook teaches philosophy, business ethics and related subjects in the University at Buffalo programmes.

What’s an English major good for?

Slightly more “practical” than Philosophy is English Language and Literature. According to a New York Times report by Verlyn Klinkenborg (June 22, 2013), in 1991, 165 students graduated from Yale – bastion of the humanities – with a BA in English Literature. By 2012, that number was 62. In 1991, the top two majors at Yale were history and English. In 2013, they were economics and political science.

“What is an English major good for?” asks the NYT writer. “In a way, the best answer has always been, wait and see — an answer that satisfies no one. And yet it is a real answer, one that reflects the versatility of thought and language that comes from studying literature. Former English majors turn up almost anywhere, in almost any career, and they nearly always bring with them a rich sense of the possibilities of language, literary and otherwise.

“The canon — the books and writers we agree are worth studying — used to seem like a given, an unspoken consensus of sorts. But the canon has always been shifting, and it is now vastly more inclusive than it was 40 years ago. That’s a good thing. What’s less clear now is what we study the canon for and why we choose the tools we employ in doing so.

“A technical narrowness, the kind of specialisation and theoretical emphasis you might find in a graduate course, has crept into the undergraduate curriculum. That narrowness sometimes reflects the tight focus of a professor’s research, but it can also reflect a persistent doubt about the humanistic enterprise. It often leaves undergraduates wondering, as I know from my conversations with them, just what they’ve been studying and why,” the NYT report adds.

Key skills of a university graduate

Harvard University has listed a set of skills that Liberal Arts majors ought to acquire, it is applicable too to all who have undergone the rigours of a university education:

- Writing, speaking and disseminating information across different audiences
- Understanding of different cultures and knowing appropriate behaviours when responding
- Organising research and analytical processing of data
- Creative thinking, and thinking on one's feet
- Dealing with ambiguity and matters that have no clearcut answers
- Synthesising new ideas

—Research findings and arguments contributed by SIM-Birmingham student Sameeksha Asher (picture left; with other SIM-Birmingham students in the Lake District north of England, during a semester at Birmingham campus)



What do you do with a BA in English?

*What do you do with a BA in English,
What is my life going to be?
Four years of college and plenty of knowledge,
Have earned me this useless degree.*

*I can't pay the bills yet,
'Cause I have no skills yet,
The world is a big scary place.*

(Song by Avenue Q)

The stereotype Liberal Arts degree is a BA in English & Literature. But how useful or useless is this qualification? One blogger (known as Cassie-wa) points out:

“There are no jobs that require you to have a BA in English. There are many jobs that would like you to have a BA in English, even more jobs that would tolerate your BA in English, but there’s no job that I can think of that states, **NON-ENGLISH MAJORS NEED NOT APPLY**. Let’s be real, here. I have picked some pretty useless specialties when it comes to real-world applications.

“But that’s because my studies weren’t necessarily about real-world applications. As a professor stated at graduation, we English majors have made the ‘brave decision’ to live in the world of ideas.

“I actually laughed out loud at that one. World of ideas, I thought. Wow, that makes me feel just great. Maybe it is brave in this kind of job market, but thin.

My decision to study English had nothing to do with bravery. I studied English because I like English. I love English. I love books. I love dissecting them and seeing what they’re really all about, and what they mean as a reflection of the society that produced them. I love experiencing new places and people and lives that are not my own, and I think that stories are the single most comprehensive way we have of doing so without actually becoming other people. I also just love reading them. Until college, I didn’t even know how to read books properly.”