

Tradition of liberal arts and its role at Vytautas Magnus University

When thinking about liberal arts education, one has to understand that the meaning of this notion has changed during the modern era and no longer represents exactly the same structure of curriculum that was once used. Nevertheless, it is important to know the history of this tradition, as the main idea – to emphasize general knowledge instead of specialization – remains the same. Even though the contemporary meaning of the word “art” associates with such disciplines as painting, sculpture etc., one of its not so widely known connotations is “the humanities”.

Bits of history

The term “liberal arts” comes from the Classical Antiquity where it denoted education suitable for a free man, be it a boy or a girl, as opposed to a slave who used only specialized technical skills he needed. During the times of the Roman Empire, the same term was used in the education system – evidence of this can be found in the epistles of Seneca the Younger. But the subjects that were studied during the Roman and medieval times came from the late Classical and Hellenistic Greece. Those were the 7 liberal arts taught during the Middle Ages. Three subjects taught first, a so called *trivium*, consisted of grammar, logic and rhetoric. After the completion of this course, student was considered to be prepared for the *quadrivium*, which included arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. These two levels could be compared to the contemporary Bachelor and Master degree studies, the latter usually designed as preparation for the pursuit of doctoral degree. In the Middle Ages, the latter was usually represented by the studies of philosophy and theology. But, as we can see, not all of the aforementioned subjects are compulsory or even available in the modern curriculum of a specific field. Those who study the humanities may have no knowledge of astronomy or geometry and yet be recognized as seekers of less vocational, broader education. That was not the case during the Middle Ages, partly because, after reintroduction of Aristotle's works, the focus on the natural sciences greatly increased. But the main reason is that human knowledge was not as extensive as it is now, so the ability to encompass everything did not look utopian.

Heritage of the past

So what is left of those 7 liberal arts today? The answer is not straightforward at all. Some universities have chosen a more practical approach, preparing students for the job market. And this comes with no surprise as employers are expecting for the graduates to have a specific set of skills and knowledge ready to be applied. Others offer a more balanced curriculum, and yet studies are oriented towards a specific field, because the amount of knowledge is way greater than it was centuries before and fragmentation of science is inevitable. Yet this does not mean that there is no need for synthesis. On the contrary, those large chunks of information can be more beneficial when properly edited. And liberal arts students/scholars happen to be some of those synthesizers. The whole process could be compared to the evolution of the Internet. Once the amount of web pages became enormously huge, search engines stepped in to help users find what they were looking for. But with the rapid development of technology and the ever-increasing number of Internet users, projects such as Wikipedia emerged and became an instant success, even though many were sceptical about them. And while its information cannot be fully trusted because the content is edited by anonymous volunteers, it can respond to the changes in our world instantly like no peer-reviewed source ever could. So it is high time that the same process began in non-virtual world.

Insider's opinion

Professor Victor de Munck of the New York State University, who occasionally visits VMU to give social anthropology seminars, shared his beliefs about liberal arts and their role in the contemporary society. "To my mind, the whole concept is debatable", de Munck says. "You cannot live by bread alone. Liberal arts are needed for a man to be culturally complete. But we can remember Abraham Maslow and his theory of the hierarchy of needs. If the primary needs are not satisfied, the higher ones just will not come to one's mind at all". According to the professor, nowadays liberal arts studies are for the masses, not for some special group of people who did not have to work and could concentrate only on their studies. Now we have local and federal requirements, various assessments. So the basic requirements to study are not as demanding as they were before. Higher education, liberal and otherwise, is available to the majority. But we can remember that its availability was a goal that was realized in the 20th century. However, a subject suitable for the majority does not always take individual needs into consideration and levels the system's participants. "Due to stricter state control, one has to consider laws upheld at the national and international level and various procedures. There is less and less freedom to handle things on your own", the professor pondered.

When asked to compare studies in the US and Europe, de Munck admitted that Europe has less bureaucracy. On the other hand, bureaucracy enables the minimum standards ensured by proper evaluation. Here, professors write marks based on their own opinion, while in the US they have to follow strict rules, which make it less likely that slacker students will pass.

Professor also thinks that cultural diversity has become more important in the US. The focus is more on the ethical, critical perspective rather than exact disciplines. In other words, it could be described as systematic inquiry. Nevertheless, the US has seen the hyper-increase of bureaucratization in studies because of the centric education and the control of textbooks. Here we could mention that during the Middle Ages there was no such thing as a textbook and, like in some liberal arts universities today, students discussed the primary source/texts and made their own assumptions. For de Munck, "the narrow specialization is more of a social push, not some political strategy", so the education system is not the one to blame for the ongoing changes. Still, de Munck thinks that liberal arts would make physician a better specialist because when you study broad things, you have the opportunity to learn something from other disciplines as well. A noteworthy example of this would be the first [Doctor of Liberal Studies degree dissertation](#) defended at Georgetown University in 2010. The dissertation supports the idea that integration of visual arts into medical curricula not only enhances the quality and durability of physicians' diagnostic skills, but also proves essential—through the promotion of humanism, empathy, and ethical behaviour—to a physician's approach to those ethical questions encountered in daily clinical practice. **Therefore, the need for intercommunication is obvious and implies that specialized universities should become part of bigger liberal arts resurrection project which has already begun.**

State University of New York, where the professor holds a Chair at the Department of Anthropology, stresses the importance of preparing the students for the global community and providing an international focus to all areas of its curriculum. This might be the key point to liberal arts and education nowadays, especially for the US, which is often too self-centred. Not exact disciplines, but rather the freedom to communicate with the world, should be the point of emphasis. **Not coincidentally, VMU slogan is "Open to the World", as this university also tends to provide every student with a broader perspective no matter what he is studying.**

Obviously, not all study programmes have a strong connection with the actual profession. A physician might have better career opportunities than a philosopher but the latter can have them outside of his field of specialization. That is the strict reality of *artes liberales* and *artes mechanicae*, the difference between freedom and need. We cannot lock ourselves up and be like hermits or Castalians from Herman Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* – we inevitably apply our knowledge. Even more, we improve when we *balance* our theoretical and practical skills. And since we gain most of our practical knowledge through experience, the university should be the place that gives you a portion of the freedom you once needed but had that need repressed by strict school environment. Still, even some high schools tend to choose alternative ways of education – be it [Montessorian](#) or some other. **And learning to be free might be the best thing you can get.**

KEY FEATURES of liberal arts studies at VMU:

- 1) **Low level of hierarchy** between students and professors. In some universities, students cannot even think of having a friendly chat after the lecture, let alone continuing the discussion in an informal space. Here it is the usual experience.
- 2) **Combination of major and minor studies** is popular in the US. In Lithuania, too, you can have it now and for free – you do not need to pay for the additional courses taken as your minor. This way, VMU encourages you to learn and seek maximum knowledge from different fields, not to mention the vast amount of languages available to learn. There are no hindrances to major in Physics and minor in Arts.
- 3) **Humanities and social sciences as emphasis** – even computer science students learn history, languages, psychology or sociology to have the same basic set of broader knowledge. What is more, they can choose the courses they want the most from each of the specific fields. So, if it is compulsory to take one course from Social sciences, it can be Sociology, Psychology or any other available that semester.
- 4) **The addition of the Music Academy** and its introductory courses to large crowds of students from other faculties complete the list of 7 liberal arts at VMU. You will have a chance to study them all as compulsory or selective courses during your Bachelor years.

Liberal arts in the US, Europe and VMU

Even though studies of liberal arts originated in Medieval Europe, nowadays the model is being imported from the US, where this type of studies blossomed partly because of the overall strength of the education system. So what are the main features of a liberal arts university and how does VMU compare to them? By its structure and curriculum options, VMU can be compared to the [University College Maastricht](#) in the Netherlands, which emphasizes freedom of choice for the students and yet remains structured. University offers students three concentrations – the humanities, natural and social sciences – of which students pick one in addition to the core curriculum and self-assembled courses for general education. Likewise, students at VMU have the mandatory type A courses, type B courses, from which students choose at least one of each field, and finally type D courses, which are chosen freely and are somewhat similar to the general education courses offered at the University College Maastricht.

We can also find 'true' liberal arts universities in Europe too, as they have recently begun to emerge. One of them is the [European College of Liberal Arts](#) (ECLA) founded in 1999, which started offering 4-year Bachelor of Arts programme of Value Studies only 2 years ago. There are no departments and the study programme is integrated without any specific concentration.

Students choose two of three broad categories – Art and Aesthetics, Ethics and Political Theory, Literature and Rhetoric. What is more, there are only 60 students and 19 teachers, which enables close and informal communication ensuring the maximum performance of each group. Coincidentally, this brings to mind the previously mentioned German writer Hesse's Castalia and shows that such places are not out of consideration in the 21st century. Remembering de Munck's opinion of the US education system, we can quote Cristina Groeger, who came to study at the ECLA from the US saying "Whenever I explain what ECLA is to friends back in the States, I usually end up making the claim: "It is what a liberal arts college should be like".

Liberal arts colleges are the most numerous in the US, Canada, the Netherlands, India and Japan. Geographically closest to Lithuania is the Institute for Interdisciplinary studies Artes Liberales at Warsaw University in Poland, though it is more focused on "research and education in the field of Greek and Roman heritage and its reception in Eastern and Central Europe", according to the information [on their website](#).

The complete list of European liberal arts colleges can be found [here](#), on the website of the consortium of European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences (ECOLAS). The website declares that the liberal arts and sciences students are first and foremost trained to:

- cultivate a broad and interdisciplinary education;
- develop a passion for life-long learning;
- think analytically and critically;
- approach issues from multiple points of view;
- communicate effectively;
- solve problems efficiently.

The organization unites more than 20 universities, with its number expected to grow as liberal arts gain recognition and popularity. One day we might see VMU on this list too, as it already has partners listed here and offers Erasmus programmes to [Tallinn University](#) and others. This university, just like VMU, focuses on the humanities and social sciences, academic assistance and freedom of choice. However, those seeking liberal arts education can receive it elsewhere as well. For example, Durham University in the UK offers [Combined Honours](#) in Arts, Social Sciences or Natural Sciences. If we agree that life-long learning has become mandatory in nowadays society, then having basic knowledge in every field gives you an advantage over your specialization-oriented colleagues. **So it is not only the rebirth of liberal arts studies, it is the rebirth of *homo liber* – a free man.**

Thus, the main requirements for a liberal arts university can be summed up as the following:

- 1) **The Socratic Method of teaching.** Students are encouraged to actively participate in class discussions where the teacher acts as a moderator, never giving the right answer unless somebody finds it on their own first. Though this is still far from the situation at VMU, the same could be said about most universities in Lithuania, as people are not yet comfortable with expressing and defending their opinion, often afraid of being ridiculed by teachers and students. But eventually this will change, because living in contemporary society requires such skills. Without them, an individual will be simply wiped out of the competition for better life opportunities.
- 2) **Good professor-student ratio**, which is often less than 10 to 1, allowing the professor to work individually with every student. This is mainly because most universities are not rich enough in financial and human resources and cannot afford to have two groups of

education and research oriented teachers. That is the main reason why VMU and other Lithuanian universities still cannot compete in this respect. However, once the economic situation eventually gets better, the ratio will surely improve. For now, this is compensated by friendly student-teacher relationship.

- 3) **The emphasis on undergraduate (Bachelor degree) level** to gain the broadest possible knowledge. While the same practice should be followed in Lithuania, the actual process has been the opposite, accelerated by job market conditions and the controversial education reform, after which study programmes became more specialized. This allows universities to attract more students while offering nearly the same curriculum for several Bachelor study programmes. On the other hand, since many subjects overlap during the first years, students get to meet their colleagues from other specialties and faculties, thus letting them engage in discussions with people interested in many different things. The same cannot be said about the more specialized universities, where each faculty is concerned with their own matters behind closed doors.
- 4) **Smaller size than traditional universities**, which usually means that more individual attention is given to each student due to better student-professor ratio and no massive lectures.
- 5) **Residential**. This means that students live and learn away from home, often for the first time, learning to get along with others on the campus, which is usually located a bit further away from the centre of the city thus allowing the students to concentrate on studies. Additionally, the residential experience of living on the campus brings a wide variety of cultural, political and intellectual events to students who otherwise might not have sought them out in a non-residential setting. Even though the first medieval liberal arts universities did not have campuses of their own, later they have become almost a must for such an institution. As for VMU, it does not have its own campus, but the faculties are not far away from each other, international students live in the same dormitories and, through collective language and liberal arts classes, it is easy to know each other pretty well. Before you know it, familiar faces surround you wherever you go and campus turns into a place filled with smiles, youthful spirit and thirst for knowledge.
- 6) **A typically two-year exploration of the liberal arts or general knowledge** before declaring a major. In some cases (i.e. ECLA), it is never declared at all because the curriculum is centered on broad knowledge. Another example would be some Scandinavian universities where students learn philosophy during their first two years. And this should come as no surprise because in the medieval times philosophy was depicted as the nourisher of the seven liberal arts. VMU also aims at this type of education. The type A courses of its curriculum form a *trivium* of their own, consisting of Philosophy, Science World and Becoming of Modern Lithuania. Though these are massive lectures, they fit in perfectly with the vision of VMU being open to Kaunas, Lithuania and the world, as anyone can participate and discuss the core questions of our universe. Another thing that has become even better since the Middle Ages are **freely-chosen subjects**, which were not an option in those times. However, since the amount of information available was much smaller, one could argue that a single programme then could have encompassed the entire knowledge. Students learned from direct sources, not textbooks.
- 7) **The specific name of degree**, i.e. Bachelor of Liberal Arts, awarded to students who major in liberal arts, pursue interdisciplinary studies, or design their own concentrations. That gives the student a proper distinction among many other graduate students. Currently there are no such distinctions in Lithuania – students get one Bachelor's degree regardless of the chosen field of study. This aspect could be one of the future goals, as studies at VMU are different from other universities, especially if the student decides to take minor studies and a few language courses. He would broaden his knowledge in this way, which is often

appreciated by employers or foreign academic institutions. **Thus, even if education concentrations in the diploma are implemented in Lithuania, rest assured that VMU will not be easily categorized and will retain its uniqueness.**

While the Bachelor's or Master's degrees in Liberal arts have been a tradition for a long time, the inception of the [D.L.S.](#) (Doctor of Liberal Studies) degree is a turning point in the education system. This programme, mentioned earlier in the text, was established in the University of Georgetown according to the idea that today synthesis is more important than creating new knowledge in a particular field. Just like the Doctor of Philosophy is an advanced degree not focused on studying and researching philosophy as a subject, so is the Doctor of Liberal Studies an advanced degree not focused on studying and researching liberal studies as a point of study.

- 8) **Books, not textbooks.** Forget methodical tools and textbooks – as early as in the Middle Ages, liberal arts universities were already inviting students to discover the original work, often encouraging them to learn the language it was originally written in as well. In this process, the student makes his own assumptions and conclusions while the lecturer performs the role of a tutor without assuming the position of authority.

The emphasis on the original texts and not textbooks has been encouraged by the Great Books Program started in the US during the interwar period. Soon it expanded to other countries and especially Canada, where liberal arts colleges offered a lot of courses and BA programmes that included only Great Books, such as Plato's Republic or Shakespeare plays. Vytautas Adomaitis, one of the participants of [Collegium Artes Liberales discussion](#) at VMU, talked of how he acquired this kind of education while studying at Thomas Aquinas College in the United States. One question that may arise (and it has been raised many times) is who judges what books should make the list? **It has been argued that it is a collection of books written by a bunch of “dead white males”, so many revisions have been made through the years, though the core remains an unchanged and integral part of the Western canon. What does such a programme mean – Western egocentrism, global Westernization or broad knowledge? These questions are probably best suited for discussions at liberal arts universities.**

The bottom line

The process of globalization and the social push Prof. Victor de Munck mentioned before tell us about the necessity of being social and socially responsible. Helping Japan and other initiatives remind us that it is not just *us* in *here*, in an exact time and space. We have Lithuanians who lived in the *past*; we have Lithuanians in *other parts* of the world. We have *other people* living together with us. So we should learn to appreciate not just another person but their otherness too. And that is easier when you have things in common – common knowledge, experience and shared beliefs. **Thus liberal arts education serves as a tool, a framework where you can share your experience with everyone, disregarding time and space constraints. It is the pool where the greatest human ideas start to materialize. So that is why YOU can start to do it here, at VMU.**