What is Liberal Education and what could it be?
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EUROPEAN STUDENTS ON THEIR LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION

Edited by Jakob Tonda Dirksen, Daniel Kontowski, and David Kretz

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This volume is a collection of European students’ voices on their liberal education. It is not a comparative, scholarly study of student experiences in liberal education programmes, although it might serve as a first step in this direction. Rather, it is an invitation to explore the promises, some characteristics, and pitfalls of liberal education in Europe as perceived by those who took part in them. And it is an invitation to initiate into the diversity of institutional and curricular arrangements of liberal arts education in Europe.

Researchers and journalists who cover liberal education will hopefully find students’ insider perspectives valuable for their work. The accounts also offer inspiration and caveats to administrators, faculty, and sponsors currently engaged in liberal education initiatives or considering to do so in the future. Last but not least, this is a book for students of the liberal arts. Prospective students will get a better idea of what to expect, current ones may find that others share some of their joys and struggles, and former ones can reflect a formative phase in their lives. Thereby, and although it focuses on liberal education in Europe, this book can be of interest and relevance to a global audience.

The following editorial introduction focuses on the idea and motivation behind this collection, its contemporary relevance, and how it came to be what it is. It also includes brief sketches on the background, recurrent themes, and the place of students’ voice in the discussion of liberal education in Europe today. The heart of this book, however, are the seventeen individual contributions from students and alumni of thirteen liberal arts programmes in five European countries, critically reflecting on their personal educational experiences through a variety of written forms.
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Liberal education has a long and well-documented history. Westerners commonly trace it back to Ancient Greece, though there are similar traditions in today’s China, India, and Arabic cultures. Yet, the perhaps most typical image of a contemporary liberal education is distinctively American. One pictures a leafy college campus somewhere in the United States, where undergraduate students pursue a four-year degree that combines a general education with more specialised courses in one (major) or two (major and minor) academic disciplines. Professionally oriented studies are being pursued at the graduate level, which frees the liberal arts college to become a place for intellectual and social exploration, additionally honed by smaller classes, more contact with the faculty, and campus life made possible by residential arrangement. Such an education is expensive, largely private, and in the past, it was both a tool for sustaining social standing of a new generation and sometimes an effective vehicle of social mobility. Its image remains strong partly due to the prestige of highly selective liberal arts colleges and the rather special character of this broad undergraduate education. The idea of the liberal arts is still able to inspire educators around the world to an ingenuous diversity of putting its educational philosophy into practice, thereby reconciling traditional values with contemporary cultures of higher education. What might be more fascinating is the internal diversity of liberal education in the US, fuelled by ingenuity in dealing with a broad educational tradition and shifting historical challenges.

Directly replicating this form of education in other countries is rather difficult, if possible or desirable at all. According to a 2013 study by Kara A. Godwin, there are almost 200 liberal education programmes outside the United States\(^1\). A 2017 database by Tim Hoff and Daniel Kontowski, created for the European Liberal Arts

\(^1\) Godwin, Kara A. 2013. ‘The Global Emergence of Liberal Education: A Comparative and Exploratory Study’. Boston College. Dissertation accessible online. Godwin continues her work on the topic and new publications can be accessed here.
Initiative, lists 84 Liberal Arts programmes across Europe\(^2\). Their practice of liberal education includes both necessary compromises with laws and traditions of different countries and sparks of pure innovation. As a whole, liberal arts programmes in Europe do not form a movement operating on a clear definition, organisation or aims for liberal education. But they can be expected to hold on to a promise, that at some level of generalisation is common: to offer a university education that is different from the dominant, single-discipline delivery for large, anonymous student bodies whose educational goals are externally pre-determined.

A common cliché is to say that Europe re-imports liberal education from the US, yet, what is now called ‘American’ was initially imported from the ‘artes liberales’ faculties of medieval English and Scottish universities. But while historically sound, this recap is not particularly helpful for understanding what it means to offer and undergo liberal education in 21st century Europe\(^3\). Asking students about their own education, on the other hand, adds a unique complement to existing, scholarly perspectives on the value and shortcomings of European liberal education. This is what we embarked on.

**Unheard voices from the stage**

In the fall of 2016, we invited the community of young scholars, committed students and alumni of these European liberal education programmes to help vocalising student perspectives on the Liberal Arts in contemporary European higher education by contributing to a student-led, experience-oriented compendium of student voices. This book is the edited collection of 17 selected responses. The idea of our initiative was sparked by the 1st European Liberal Education Student Conference (LESC), which took place at Leuphana University of Lüneburg in May 2016, organised by and for students of the liberal arts & sciences from all across Europe. It was the first time that so many students from so many liberal arts & sciences programmes in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) met, deliberated, and meaningfully engaged with the

\(^2\) The ELAI database is accessible online [here.](#)

\(^3\) “LAS21—Liberal Arts and Sciences in the 21st century”, a project led by Howard Gardner at Harvard, aims to reconstruct contemporary perceptions of liberal education by various groups in diverse organisational settings throughout the US. Whilst more constricted in scope and scholarly ambition, we start from a similar premise here.
purpose and with the different ways to realise the peculiar form of university education that they were all part of. As a platform and facilitator for this young collective, the LESC had the self-assigned task of enquiring into the state of affairs of European liberal education today.

With this book, we are returning to the two questions of the conference: What is Liberal Education – and what could it be? There is a lot of scholarship, and we have useful definitions and informants for defining what the liberal arts are and what they are about - from Aristotle to Humboldt, from Confucius to Nussbaum, Strauss, or even Wallace. Yet are these definitions fully adequate for our venture? Those simple questions - What is Liberal Education – and what could it be? - do not know one, do not know a few answers.

Until now, those who have spoken about and on behalf of the young European liberal arts movement have been administrators, faculty members, and professional researchers. These people are experts undoubtedly, but experts from the side of facilitators and the external view of the scholar. As a complementary approach to prescriptive definitions in educational theory and administration, we wanted to fill this gap by collecting the missing inside views, students’ very own perceptions, experiences and expectations of a contemporary liberal education. As a source for our fellow and prospective members of the European liberal education community. We felt that students are perfectly able to engage meaningfully with the topic through their personal, first-hand experience, and not only have their voices heard in either marketing and outreach material or programme-internal questionnaires. With this compendium, we aim at making students and alumni heard and recognised as the experts they are, as those who might well be the most existentially engaged insiders of European liberal education.

‘How do you perceive, how did you experience your Liberal Education? What were your expectations, what was it meant to be?’
   - we asked them.

‘Be bold, disturbingly rebellious or funny, write of your hopes and fears, your development or challenges, write what you think and what you believe, be queer and immediate – and most importantly: be honest and write your original narrative, a description and prescription of contemporary Liberal Arts,’
   we invited them.
Their reflections, in their own voices, help us to explore further questions such as:

- What kind of footprint does liberal education leave on us?
- What does the concept mean?
- Is it important to have one concept or could there be many?
- Why do some people take the risk of choosing liberal education against the mainstream dogma of specialised training?
- What, if anything, do students of liberal education have in common, intellectually and socially?

The result of our call is a collection that includes contributions diverse in form and focus. While all contributions deal with student perspectives on liberal education, they address the general question through a diversity of means and range from personal-descriptive to essayistic-theoretical and artistic pieces. Avoiding a survey model allowed all contributors to express themselves in the way they thought to be most appropriate and felt most comfortable with. Generally, we requested students to reflect on the bigger questions of liberal education from their personal experience in around 1000 words.

The book is a selection of contributions that have undergone multiple rounds of editing and revising throughout the past months. It is, perhaps, something similar to a Yearbook with a harsh and picky team of editors. The call for papers was aimed at attracting contributions from which the book design could later be drawn inductively, rather than being pre-conceived by us as editors. Our aim as editors was then to make the argument in each piece understandable, relevant and convincing. Our role, therefore, was to ask questions, not to suggest answers, hoping that the contributions would thereby come closer to the matter and the immediate students’ experiences. As all three editors attended rather different liberal education institutions, it allowed authors to understand what is assumed as obvious but might not be shared by others in European liberal education. We also tried to be alert to the replication of easy buzzwords and, where possible, suggested more cautious, critical approaches drawing on personal educational histories.

While we always aimed to let the authors speak with their voice, we also presented them with challenges and considerations that would often lead them to revise their views and refine their positions. We did not accept every perspective and every argument as it was but
tried to engage our authors in a conversation that would challenge the underlying logics and the coherence of every argument wherever possible and encourage reconsideration and highest possible reflection on the nevertheless very personal pieces in this compendium. Only after these editorial interventions did we accept some pieces, which seemed opinionated, self-contradicting, or ideological. Creative and opinionated submissions were appreciated; if they showed thoughtfulness and coherence on their own terms. The central criterion for acceptance was, however, that the authors convincingly bring their personal experience to bear on the two general questions.
The 17 papers that have made it into this collection so far come from liberal arts students or alumni of 13 different programmes all across the EHEA. There was explicitly no need for referencing or using literature. However, in case thoughts of others should be ‘plagiarised’ we asked all authors to make it transparent by referencing accordingly.

Our hope to generate a more inclusive and thorough approach to what is happening now under the name of ‘liberal education’ invites the question: What do we mean by the term? There are good reasons to dodge this bullet, primarily because this book strives to be descriptive (in an inspiring way) rather than a prescriptive account of what programmes and colleges should understand by this term. Choosing such an approach established some limits on traditional editing procedures of collaborative academic work. Given the multiplicity of meanings associated with ‘liberal education,’ ‘liberal arts and sciences,’ or any combination of those two variants, unifying terminology would have effaced much of the existing diversity. The language used in documents, speeches, and scientific articles is hardly unified and, accordingly, our contributors opted for different variants. As each of them is legitimate and has examples in literature, we felt that at the end of the day it is not a task for the editor to force contributions to align with a single standard here. What we insisted on was consistency within each piece and using lowercase when referring to the concept and uppercase when concerned with the institutions and degree programmes.

Instead of abstracting all seventeen contributions individually, we would like to briefly reflect upon three themes and a few curiosities that emerge throughout the collection here.
The many roads to the liberal arts...

A first theme is the students’ motivation to enrol for undergraduate study in the Liberal Arts. In many institutions, liberal education still is in a rather experimental phase, and some of our authors even belong to the courageous members of their first cohorts. A common sentiment here is one of the scepticism of others (mostly peers and parents) that finds expression in questions such as ‘So, you are doing a bit of everything,’ ‘What do you want to do after you tried out all those different things?,’ but also ‘What is liberal education?’ and, in the first person, ‘Do I know what I am doing here?’ Our authors reflect on the circumstances in which they learned about a particular programme and the idea behind it, features they found attractive, and they reflect on the relevance of their backgrounds to inform final decisions - at times distanced, at times more emotional.

Many observe an interesting correlation between being a liberal arts & sciences student and a seemingly high average of social, economic, and cultural capital. One can hypothesise that more privileged social backgrounds enable bigger freedom from at least some more immediate demands of utility and economic usability of their education - and therefore make liberal education an option in the first place. Personality and social traits required to choose, persist, and graduate from a liberal education programme, and to fancy, and being able to afford idleness for, reflecting on this experience, might thus be a particularly suitable place to start from in a search for commonalities among European liberal education students.

Reports from the front

A second thematic cluster is authors’ descriptions of their experiences with studying in a liberal education programme. While the curriculum is one of the most salient dimensions, it is hardly universal. Students and alumni describe what they consider important – from the atmosphere, people, distinctiveness, to the city, university, and workload. Students describe other students, based on their relation with their professors, advisers, and offer us a glimpse into the dynamics within the institutions. They frequently compare liberal education programmes with ‘normal’ ones, and some have first-hand experience with both. Sometimes they enter a difficult path of comparing liberal education programmes be-
tween each other, which is challenging but also very enlightening. Where possible, editors tried to fact-check and discuss claims that appeared controversial but final decisions were usually left to the authors. Apart from a pure description, our contributors reflect on their hopes, dreams, and goals, and they evaluate their liberal education by comparing expectations with reflections on their study experiences. They show areas of fulfilment, but also point towards sources of disappointment. Yet evaluation does not stop there. Many pieces show conscious reflection on the changes of subjects or disciplines studied as part of their liberal education in concrete circumstances, mostly in a positive tone.

What liberal education is...

A third theme within the contributions in this volume is the given evidence of our authors’ different conceptions of and grounds from which they appreciate their liberal education. These range from a life-changing philosophy of education to a variant of how to structure a university curriculum. It needs to be borne in mind that the programmes, which our authors come from, are considerably diverse in this respect, and that the educational philosophy and realisation of liberal education is not as important to some of our authors as to others. Some treated the concept quite casually, and seem to could have just as easily described their experience without it - which is both informative and potentially troubling. Ensuring graduate employability and risking neoliberalisation of liberal education, advocating great books approach and decolonisation, curving a bigger place for student choice and ensuring a well-rounded education – those, and other debates inherent to the more general discourses around liberal education, echo in the student contributions collected here...

Into the future...

Despite three decades of development, liberal education is still not widely recognised in Europe. The stakes were against it for far too long. The movement is young and uncoordinated. A 'liberal education' brand is still emerging and cannot effectively attract the attention of large numbers of prospective students, their parents, potential employers, faculty, and administrators yet. However, a certain momentum can be witnessed now.
Liberal education has a growing body of students who see it as a worthy pursuit. At older programmes, alumni now send their children the same path. Administrators are facing generational change, students and faculty now gather for conferences in order to reflect on the European movement. Despite many challenges, liberal education initiatives survive and, in some countries, even steadily grow - we want to know why.

This book was meant as a catalyst for a discussion of what liberal education is and what it could be. Students should be part of this conversation. “If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students.”, Cardinal John Henry Newman once said. Much has changed since the times of his statement. Today, students are more diverse in any demographic sense. Some struggle with questions, some question the struggle. But if we agree with this much-quoted passage above, then we should think it a good idea to invite students to the table whenever their education is being discussed - as, ultimately their education affects their lives the most.
Acknowledgements

We would have never met with our authors if it was not for the welcoming young people of Studium Individuale at Leuphana University Lüneburg, who hosted us in their homes, entertained us in their university, and nurtured our minds in their classrooms. The 1stLESC would not have been possible without the financial assistance of the European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences (ECOLAS), Leuphana University, and the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ). We thank ECOLAS directors Samuel Abraham, Hans P.M. Adriaansens, Laurent Boetsch and Jochen Fried, Volker Balli of Leuphana University, Jürgen Kaube, publisher-editor of FAZ, and Julie J. Kidd for the Travel Research Fellowship of two of the editors and her general life-long support of European liberal arts.

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We would also like to thank all our fellow students and lecturers as fellow learners, and as those liberal artists and artisans who, as nothing more than humans and neighbours, have taught us much more than any textbook or lecture could ever accomplish. You have indeed filled them with meaning in the first place, and you make liberal education become real day-in-day-out by dedicating a share of your lifetime to our common endeavour. We are immensely indebted to all of you and hope not to have failed you in providing equally familial, pleasant, and fruitful environments to flourish in.

Last but not least, this book would have never been possible without the dedicated work of the authors, who have not only responded to the invitation to reflect, describe, and expose their experience but also volunteered ample time and gave consideration to the complex editorial process. Their generosity is one of the things that make European liberal education such an inspiring alternative.

Jakob Tonda Dirksen, Daniel Kontowski, and David Kretz

Barcelona, New York, and Paris, May 2017
What is Liberal Education and what could it be?

EUROPEAN STUDENTS ON THEIR LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION
Are we artists?
What would you say?
We discussed this question
the other day.
We don’t really paint,
we don’t really draw
We are the artists
one hasn’t seen before
Since we draw connections
through actions
reactions
and dissatisfaction;
we strive to improve
we read and we chose
to question and see
to feel and to be
the controversy
and fill the empty
space of interdisciplinarity.

Are we the scientists
with white coats in labs?
That mix, test, and count
what’s good and what’s bad?
What’s black and what’s white?
What’s wrong and what’s right?
I think we are the scientists
of the shades of grey
when everyone’s leaving
we smile and stay
to inspect it all
and what’s in between,
what is forgotten
remains not unseen.
And our little voices
are actually heard:
Yes, we are scientists,
our lab is the world.
Nathalie Kornet, 20, is a 2nd year student at University College Freiburg (UCF). She is majoring in governance and currently very interested in human rights and gender studies. She helped to organise last year’s conference from Freiburg and really enjoyed the experience, which is summarised in this poem. She also was in the organising team for the 2nd LESC, which took place at UCF in May 2017.

While striving for truth we take different roads in our home country or even abroad. By taking the paths not taken we stumble and fall and are often mistaken But taking the road less travelled by makes all the difference; walking through bushes is a variance of the narrow, straight road that directly leads to only one point of view or a specific profession, but for sure not to you with all depth and passion that you can only find through digression.

And we all might feel hopeless, disturbed and confused but there will always be someone who will never refuse to listen and guide and make you feel alright. Cause doubts are as important as answers if there are ever some, since with an answer comes a question and another one that leads us to seek and explore the hard question as we climb up the peak. And so many values that we knew as we grew were changed irreversibly by the uncommon view. And here we are climbing together making liberal education more present than ever.
A Liberal Education: An Education of the Soul  CLARA HABERBERGER

I must confess that I never consciously made the decision to pursue a liberal education. I mean, I couldn’t even explain what a liberal education is (or at least my conception of it) until well into my second year at Leiden University College (LUC).

The first time I truly asked myself what a liberal education actually is, was in an excellent optional philosophy course taught by Andreas Kinneging. In fact, it was probably the first time I had really analysed myself and asked myself what I wanted from my education. With Kinneging, we spent two months reading Plato’s Republic. Just reading one book and discussing it with the single goal of understanding what we were reading. Within modern liberal education, this is almost novel. Discussing without comparing a hundred thousand different sources and points of view? Discussing without being critical? What is that?

It turns out, it’s pretty damn useful. I came out of the course wanting not only an education that would help me in my career or even help me solve ‘global challenges.’ I wanted an education that would make me a better human being: an education of the soul.

Over my last year at LUC and, in particular through my involvement with the 1st European Liberal Education Student Conference, I have come to see ‘the education of the soul’ as the ideal conception of liberal education. I can best explain this with the help of Plato. Plato broke the soul down into three parts: reason, spirit, and desires. Plato saw the soul of the good man, the ideal soul, the just soul, the educated soul as one who is wise and courageous and which is able to moderate its desires so that it may focus on the achievement of higher (immaterial) goods.

I believe that true liberal artisans would get along well with Plato: they are open minded, critical thinkers, who do not back away from challenges. Instead, they tend to seek them out: passionate about things beyond themselves - issues in the wider world around them. I think any institution, which promises its students that it
can help them foster these qualities, can give students a true liberal education.

I believe that this is what LUC has done for me. It has established a space and attracted a student body that are ideal for young liberal artisans. Through seminar-based learning, grading partially based on participation, and varied assessment methods; LUC tends to foster lots of debate and discussion. The unique on-campus living at LUC is also an important component in this. At LUC, all first and second years have their accommodation within the college building, their apartments and classrooms separated only by an elevator. Because of this, the academic debates tend to go on well into the early morning hours. The ability to reason, and especially to criticise is fostered to the utmost at LUC, and the international student body; I believe it also signals our courage. Some of us moved across the world to come to LUC. By choosing LUC, we have also made a choice to study in English – for many of us, not our mother tongue. A few of us overcame judgment from families or even wider society to pursue a liberal education. All of us chose to study something that does not end in a defined career. Since the programme at LUC is taught under the header of ‘Global Challenges’, as diverse as the particular passions of LUC students are, they are similar in scale – our sights are set on horizons far beyond

The Educated Soul
*Through the Lens of Plato’s Tripartite Soul*

**Reason** (Man)
- Critical & Understanding = Wise
- Controls Desires aided by Spirit

**Spirit** (Lion)
- Courageous
- Aids Reason in controlling Desires

**Desires** (Beast)
- Good desires = Higher Goods
  = Immaterial, Virtuous
- Tempered by Reason
our own little worlds, and they are all driven by a desire to make a change for the better.

Nevertheless, I also believe that not everyone who attends LUC leaves with a liberal education. As in most institutions that promise a liberal education, the question of ‘what is liberal education?’ is simply not being discussed. Instead, like many ‘liberal arts colleges’ LUC seems to hope for a psycho-social effect. The idea is that, through discussion-based learning, close student-staff relations, and on-campus living, students will simply ‘become’ liberal artisans merely by virtue of attending the college.

But I don’t think that this is enough. I believe true liberal education is a deeply personal matter - a matter of the soul - and, as such, it is up to the student to pursue it actively. And it is absolutely impossible to actively pursue something, let alone reach it, if you have no conception of what it is and why you want it. So while colleges like LUC may have the capacity to provide a liberal education, unless these questions are discussed openly and notoriously throughout the programme, I think it is quite possible for students to graduate from liberal arts colleges without becoming liberal artisans at all. I was lucky to have attended a class in which I was forced to ask myself these questions. But it was only an elective course. I would like to see all students at liberal arts colleges invest some time in asking themselves what differentiates a liberal education from other forms of education, and why it is worth pursuing. It is my sincere hope for the European Liberal Education Student Conferences that we bring this discussion into the limelight.

Clara Haberberger was born in Germany in 1994. She moved to Melbourne, Australia in 2001 where she completed her primary and secondary education. Since 2013 she has been living in the Netherlands where she is pursuing a career in international law. Currently a student of law at Leiden University, she attended Leiden University College from 2013 to 2016, graduating with a degree in Liberal Arts: Global Justice. While her main area of study is international law, Clara has a keen interest in philosophy, specifically the ideas of justice and the education of the human soul. She presented a paper entitled “A Return to Understanding: Making liberal education valuable again” at the 1st European Liberal Education Student Conference in Lüneburg.
Coming from a college preparatory school and having focused intently on the Natural Sciences in my final two years there, I was skeptical of the whole “liberal arts” business my college counsellor pitched to me. My parents whispered that there was no future in that sort of degree, that one must specialise in a specific field of expertise or undergo vocational training in order to be employable. And didn’t I want to avoid being a dependent for the rest of my existence? Of course. But, if there was anything my last years at high school had taught me, it was that I had no clue what degree I wanted to pursue. What if I chose wrongly? My college counsellor assuaged my fears, spinning sweet stories of how a liberal arts degree is all the more attractive nowadays for the unique skill set and thinking capacities it indicates.

My parents’ and my conclusion was that as long as I had some sort of degree and could sell myself well, I would be a lot better off than those without any higher education at all. A liberal arts education seemed the perfect fit for someone who couldn’t make up their mind, whereas studying in Europe looked ideal for someone as suspicious of the United States as I was. Thus, I found myself in Berlin, attending what is unanimously agreed by all who go there to be one of the weirdest places. Most say this affectionately. Perhaps it is the GDR architecture, the seeming idyllic calm of the neighbourhood in a city renowned for its turbulent history, the uncomfortably uneven gender ratio, the ultimate unlikelihood of the institution’s existence, and the stubborn incohesiveness of the student body that makes for this sentiment. Or perhaps it is in the nature of those who find themselves there to shirk normalcy. In any case, Bard College Berlin (BCB) could never be what anyone expected.

A year and a half into my liberal arts education, I’m still trying to make sense of what it entails. By now, I have the basics down: It comes from the tradition of classical antiquity, drawing upon a diverse range of disciplines in the cultivation of civic-minded indi-
Margarethe Hattingh is technically of South African descent, but, due to frequent relocations during her childhood and early adulthood, she considers herself a citizen of the world and stands in solidarity with the rest of humanity. She is currently nineteen years old and enrolled in the undergraduate Economics and Politics programme at Bard College Berlin where she also edits the student blog. She hopes to one day make a large, tangible positive difference in other’s lives. For now, she contents herself with the reality of everyday existence and savours the ever-fleeting and infinite moments that make up its entirety.

Reading between the lines, you’ll discover that a liberal arts education also means having to step out of your comfort zone to dabble in new disciplines or consider contradictory opinions. At times it can result in frustration or despair, but the prospect of occasional enlightenment keeps discussions going. It means the stripping of pretences and the figuring out of what you truly believe, and the incessant questioning of these beliefs before the uncertain promise of a greater truth. This sort of education requires passion and honesty, a willingness to engage; too many classes have failed because of those who don’t want to be there. (On behalf of all those who do: If you don’t want to exert the necessary effort, go away). Pursuing this degree means assuming the responsibility to ask and attempt to answer the big questions in life that truly matter, having to accept that this could be futile, and continuing with the insanity anyway. (Warning: It might leave you frazzled and wondering if you’ve learned anything at all.)

But, even as you doubt its validity, you’ll know in your heart of hearts that what you are doing is important and that institutions like BCB represent the spirit of free inquiry of which too many are desperately deprived. You’ll know that your education is a privilege and that it is your responsibility to realise how to use it. Your liberal education is what you make of it.
I received my primary education in Norway and completed the IB diploma at United World College of South East Asia in Singapore. Being overwhelmed with two years of constant sleep-deprivation, travelling all over Asia, and working too much, I think I decided to accept my offer to study liberal arts at King’s College London because it was the least narrowly defined course on my list, and I was not nearly in a state of mind to define the focus of the rest of my (academic) career at that point in time.

Moving to London felt reassuring, exciting, and overwhelming all at once. In terms of getting settled in, I doubt I ever did. Jumping in between departments, pursuing a major in development geography in the School of Public Policy, and tipping into political philosophy, history, critical theory, comparative politics, and literature in the School of Arts and Humanities, my academic home was Thursday night with the liberal arts gang.

Our shared insight, besides that academic institutions are prime examples of bloated bureaucracies, was that ultimately, no one is right, and no one has the answers if you look close enough.
The most interesting conflict for me was that between political science and development geography. Dealing with many of the same issues, politics, as I got to know it, believes itself to be a science, viewing its own answers as law according to its own internal logic. Geography on the other hand, from my experience, questions, challenges, philosophises, discusses, and does not preach absolutism. Neither accepted insights or methodologies from the other. How? Why? My conclusion is - there is no reason.

Coming to terms with this relativism has been difficult, as one is taught all through primary and secondary school that this is what happened, this is why, and that is final. Looking back at the certainty with which we made claims regarding the wars of the world, the failures of modern society, and human nature at that age, B.L.A. (before liberal arts), makes me a little nostalgic. Ah, how easy it all seemed, how few grey zones there were! But that is not taking seriously the complexity and absurdity of human existence.

Ultimately, liberal arts and its interdisciplinarity has for me involved an acknowledgement of life as simultaneously meaningless and bursting with meaning. I am no longer able to conceptualise or express my life and future life without including art, personal growth, relationships, and emotions, as well as academic and professional progress. Society tells us to put our success trajectory at the centre of our life’s stage, but that is not where its meaning lies, and doing that would for me be a recipe for disaster. Liberal arts can teach you to let yourself be the judge of what is good, what is bad, what you value and what does not matter to you. Ultimately, what more could you ask of an education?

Brita Bergland is Norwegian but has spent her time living in Singapore, London, Melbourne, and Oxford since 2010. She is a passionate social-democrat and has been engaged with issues of social justice, racism, and environmentalism alongside her studies. She also enjoys rowing, bouldering, long hikes (ideally in Norway), and film photography. She wants to pursue a career pushing forward justice and transparency in the global oil sector.
I remember looking at the description of the liberal arts degree on my university website. There was a short video with Professor Aaron Rosen, then one of the people in charge of the King’s Liberal Arts programme. He was saying how different liberal arts was from other degrees, that it was closer to a classical education, instead of a contemporary, specialised one. I found this hugely interesting, it turned my prior understanding of higher education completely on its head, and thus I wanted to get involved. Over the next three years, the degree would slowly change my entire outlook on education. They were the defining years of my life, and it seems I am now a member of a small, but diverse community of students united by a love of learning for its own sake, and not as a method of becoming more employable, something I feel the liberal arts is poorly suited for.

But that realisation came later. What first attracted me to liberal arts was the openness of it, the freedom to explore and learn in a refreshing, multi-disciplinary way. At King’s College London, there were many majors available. Most students chose obvious majors like Politics or English, but some were able to fully construct a major of their own devising. I met someone who majored in Spanish, a major that wasn’t generally offered but was exclusive to him. In my own case, I could be studying documentary film one hour, Shakespeare the next. Initially, I felt the main benefit of this was that it could adapt to changing interests. And, although this was true, it had the side effect of having me come to regret my English major. I chose English as my major as I felt this was a subject I would do well at – and it was. However, over the years, exposure to different disciplines developed my interest in other fields and ultimately eclipsed my initial interest entirely. Which would not be an issue were there not expectations in King’s to specialise. In my second and third year, I was progressively interested in politics and geography, and thus might have decided to major in either of those subjects This I was unable to because I had not taken enough courses in either of these subjects to have one as a major.
This isn’t to say I didn’t enjoy the King’s Liberal Arts system, and though I eventually regretted my major, there was still a tremendous freedom to study across a number of disciplines. This proved to have an unexpected benefit. I found that studying multiple different subjects at the same time allowed me to pool knowledge and different study methodologies from each discipline for the benefit of a project. In addition, I could take different ways of thinking from different disciplines to approach a subject in a new way. For example, a film studies lecturer once commented that people who study literature alongside film studies often wrote pieces that were thematically very different to those written by pure film studies students. Those that studied literature tended to focus on character and were better at analysing a film’s themes and motifs, whereas the film studies students tended to focus on technical details, such as the use of lighting, often missed by others. The liberal arts afforded me the opportunity to think as a history student, as a philosophy student, as a film student, and as a literature student, at the same time. This is the fundamental benefit of interdisciplinarity, a topic I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about this year.

It seems obvious to me, though perhaps I’m a devotee of the gospel of liberal education, that this is the most personally beneficial form of higher education. I believe the focus of education should be for the ultimate benefit of the student, not whether they will be equipped for a specific, limited section of the ever-fluctuating job market. To me, liberal arts epitomise this.

I’ve come to see the system of having majors as merely a way to make a liberal arts curriculum more of a single discipline honours degree. Specialisation, as it is expected at King’s, allows employers to discern exactly what an individual studied. It is a way to fit the spirit of interdisciplinarity into the contrary paradigm of single-subject degrees as well as allow them to pursue their developed subject interest in further Master’s degrees. This is a double-edged sword. I feel what makes a liberal arts education attractive is its difference, that’s why we choose to study it. Interdisciplinarity can be very beneficial, but these benefits may be lessened if you are encouraged to specialise. However, if students developed a true passion for their major subject, then the ability for them to study it in a Master’s degree would be hugely beneficial to them. Especially if said Master’s would have otherwise been unattainable to them if their liberal arts degree was purely interdisciplinary.
But for me at least, this interdisciplinary way of thinking has been to a great personal benefit, but little professional value. The fancy dress of a major does not work as supposed. As of the time of writing, I am without a secure job, and the jobs I have been able to get have been casual work which required no higher education at all. This is also the case with many other KCL Liberal Arts graduates I know. And I feel, rather than know, that employers are slightly confused when they read “Liberal Arts” on my CV and not, say English Literature.

I believe, currently, that liberal arts, being a slightly unusual system, must affect my ultimate employability. Whenever I describe my degree, I get looks of confusion or, at times, bemusement. Some simply do not understand what liberal arts actually is. My grandma thinks it was a more liberal way of studying fine art. In a world dominated by specialisation, liberal arts does not offer the expected level of specialised content, even if the method of liberal arts is similar the KCL model, where specialisation is encouraged. Adding to it, the Bologna reforms were to ensure a degree of comparability between higher education qualifications across the continent. Yet liberal arts are not only incomparable in terms of content with single discipline courses, but also with each other – even in the same country.

Liberal Arts at King’s College London and the Modern Liberal Arts degree at the University of Winchester are good examples of such divergent paths. In Winchester, Modern Liberal Arts students continuously study together in small groups that serve as learning communities. At King’s, students split up and go to different departments to study different modules. There are many people who studied liberal arts at King’s the same time as me whom I never met. I know more students studying English than liberal arts.

Winchester offers an MA in Modern Liberal Arts, but it is “modern” without any academic specialisation typical for a modern research university. King’s, on the other hand, encourages an increasing level of specialisation in its programme, matching the progressively single subject specialisation of the BA. This suggests that Winchester’s Liberal Arts paradigm is fundamentally different in its concept of Liberal Arts than KCL. Due to KCL’s eventual disciplinary specialisation, a Liberal Arts MA degree is unnecessary or even illogical.
Of these two systems, the KCL system seems most adaptable and perhaps the more useful for the UK job market. Whilst this is not the reason we pursue a liberal education, it is something that requires a great deal of consideration, if merely to allow the future liberal arts graduate to live comfortably in later life. The Winchester system is of another world, purely academic.

I think beautiful in its own way. But whilst I admire the erudite nature of every Winchester Modern Liberal Arts student, its ultimate usefulness outside of an academic context could be questioned.

King’s Liberal Arts system is a hybrid, allowing students to both study in an interdisciplinary style, while still having a level of specialisation which the UK job market and graduate level education ultimately favours. Or at least it should. I studied in KCL’s Liberal Arts programme, and I am unemployed.

What I have observed is that of the most successful post-graduation, plenty have done so either through the virtue of their specialisation achieved through their Major selection, or through activities done outside their core study. One friend is teaching mathematics in a school, which was a subject he studied prior to studying liberal arts. Another has started a sports charity and academy – in KCL she led and at times coached the women’s football team. Of course, this is only from a sample of my immediate peers.

Though I have been, at times, extremely critical so far of liberal arts, this has not been out of bitterness, or disappointment, but in hope to see it flourish. A prospective liberal arts student may need to consider what they hope to gain through their education. In my case, choosing liberal arts came from a sense of curiosity and a desire for self-improvement, and it passed every expectation in those respects. But some people study at university not out of a desire for knowledge but mostly for future material gains. Currently, it is a challenge to “sell” liberal education to employers. The diversity of liberal arts programmes does not make it any easier. Perhaps, those programmes have too little common style or content to make a common case to the public imagination.

Such criticism should not be treated lightly. In the UK, studying is an extremely expensive endeavour, and picking the “wrong” academic programme (and wrong field in your CV) can cost us dearly. Maybe liberal arts is still a programme of privilege: an education
worthy of people who are free from financial considerations, and not those who wish to liberate themselves from those shackles. Maybe students from across Europe who chose Liberal Arts have now a duty to finally change this.

Arthur Peirce studied Liberal Arts (with a Major in English) at King’s College London from September 2013 to June 2016. Since graduation, he has tried to become a freelance writer, with work appearing in The Huffington Post, Times Higher Education, and Lifehack. In September 2017 he aims to return to academics by studying for a master’s degree at University College London after finding the world outside of academia to be strange and untrustworthy.
Dear Liberal Arts Education,

We first met on a chilly evening in spring. The last glimpse of sunlight reached me through my bedroom window as I was sitting in front of my computer, searching for undergraduate degrees. It was there, and then I discovered you. I knew: this was it! A couple of months later, it was time to start one of my biggest adventures: a liberal arts education. Suddenly, I was in a place where I could study what I was curious about instead of following what disciplinary authorities did prescribe. I had the freedom to choose. I had the opportunity to ask questions that fascinated me. Disciplines blurred and with that, the ability to analyse and to better understand complex conditions arose. I experienced that problems are best understood when approached from different angles. I learned about the interconnectedness of theories, opinions, and solutions. You helped me to develop the skill of critical thinking as well as to apply my eagerness to understand.

My initial motivation to spend the next years of my life with you was driven by the aspiration to pursue something less normal, do something unusual, study with an approach rather than with prearranged content. Part of the first semester was the task to design my own curriculum and defend its viability in front of fellow students and professors. My curriculum included courses such as environmental planning, international building culture, climate, and weather or sustainable economics. Our beginning was not easy; it was overwhelming to be eligible for all undergraduate courses at my university. Your programme “Studium Individuale” was just created, making me a part of your first 25 students. Most of the time, when I told students enrolled in other programmes about my liberal arts education, they reacted with “that is awesome, why didn’t I apply for that as well?” or “fascinating, that sounds like before Bologna.” On the other hand, many relatives, friends, and people outside of university did not understand what I was doing.
at all. Many comments critically concluded in “so, you are doing a bit of everything” or “what do you want to do after you tried out all those different things?”.

My initial conviction of you, oh Liberal Arts, transformed into doubt. I had so many questions myself such as ‘How can I possibly find a right combination of modules that will answer my questions?’. With the loud noise from outside, it sometimes was difficult to find answers to my own questions. The first couple of weeks were, hence, quite a drawback. I started doubting my assumptions and yourself as suitable education. Do I know what I am doing here? Where is this heading? In retrospect, the doubt was also rooted in the inability to give a title that would represent the gist of what I was doing. In my head it all made sense, fellow students and responsible lecturers understood and encouraged my path. Yet, I felt lost and wondered if you really are liberation. At this stage of doubt, the ability to reflect pitched in. I thought of you, Liberal Arts Education – a lot. As a result, I figured you put me in a state of discomfort. A space that challenges everything that is normally fixed in societal norms and in the educational system. I am grateful for that - you enabled me to think outside of the box when I approach a topic or engage with a problem. Beyond what has been done in the past.

Furthermore, I wanted to tell you that there was an issue with expectation vs. reality that differs in scale from prearranged programmes. Since the choices I made on which courses I would study depended predominantly on course descriptions, any short-term changes made by lecturers or else then potentially mismatched my intentions. The initial freedom of choice you promoted became a dependence on consistency. Even if the course itself did not change, a mere description alone was unable to tell me what was going to happen in the actual module – sometimes for the better or worse. This situation could be improved by, for example by feeding in previous experiences from students. Over the past couple of years, there must be such great collection of experiences in your network. Do you get feedback on this issue from other students? Maybe, you could create a platform that shares all made experience.

In retrospect, I think that you - Liberal Arts Education, demand the skill to be organised. You do not really offer a safety net. Nev-
Marie Josefine Hintz studied the Liberal Arts programme ‘Studium Individuale’ at Leuphana University Lüneburg, Germany from 2012 until 2016. Part of her Bachelors was a semester abroad at Sungkyunkwan University Seoul, South Korea. After participating in the Climate KIC 2016 Summer School, she enrolled in the MSc Sustainable Urbanism at The Bartlett, UCL in London, UK. Also, Josefine is a scholar of Studienstiftung des Deutschen Volkes. Her current research projects evolve around sustainability science i.e. circular cities, transdisciplinary research, and artificial intelligence linked with sustainable development as well as urban heat waves. Josefine is passionate about urban photography, coffee, and hiking in nature.
When deciding not to follow a conventional undergraduate degree programme at a British University, but instead to study liberal arts and sciences at a Dutch University College, I was conscious of my unpreparedness to commit myself to a single academic discipline and consequent career path. Sorely lacking what seemed to be a self-confidence in my academic and professional ambitions seemed at the time to be a weakness. A liberal arts education has made me realise that such apparent uncertainty is in fact liberating, rather than worrisome. The liberal arts have shown me that it is this professional and academic humility—in a time when young people are pressured to have clearly articulated convictions, interests, and ambitions—that will allow me to dare to explore disciplines beyond my specialisation.

At its core, the liberal arts are a model of education. It is essentially a proposition about the student as an individual with the capacity to develop himself both intellectually and morally. Intellectually, the liberal arts student strives to transcend conventional disciplines, but is—paradoxically—ever limited by them. Although liberal arts curricula are often hailed as interdisciplinary, much effort is made to make students conscious of those disciplines, which are supposed to be transcended. My fellow students and I are divided into ‘humanities’, ‘social sciences’ and ‘sciences’ majors. These divisions presumably reflect one’s personal, political, and professional identity. Whereas humanities’ students regard (social) sciences students as producing abstract and rational theories, which belie objectivity because of its inevitable status as an expression of some, will to power, sciences students fail to appreciate the conceptual thickness of the humanities because of their inability to produce predictions about the world. Social sciences students applaud the experimental method of the natural sciences, but disdain their reductionist agenda. But how can the goal of liberal arts, of a truly interdisciplinary education, be achieved when students are so conscious of the disciplines they strive to transcend?
Achieving a truly interdisciplinary education requires of liberal arts students a capacity to be conscious of, but not limited by, the methodological, genealogical, and sociological distinctions between contemporary disciplines. That is to say, a successful deployment of knowledge requires us to understand how it was produced. This involves admitting that some forms of knowledge are inappropriate to, and were never intended to, understand some phenomena. It is through so-called ‘core courses’ that the different areas of human knowledge can be understood in the context of a canonical tradition. The most successful ‘core courses’ are modelled on insights from the Great Books tradition, which has always been closely linked to the American liberal arts model. Since 1919, students at the Columbia University have followed Contemporary Civilization, to engage, irrespective of their disciplinary specialisation, in core texts through critical dialogue in small seminar groups. In the European context, Bard College, Berlin requires all students to follow a set of Core Courses, exploring through critical dialogue fundamental texts from Greek Civilization and Renaissance Art and Thought, and from the Origins of Political Economy to Modernism.

Although students at Amsterdam University College (AUC) may follow courses in Big Books, and Ancient and Modern Philosophical Texts, all of which I see as invaluable, these are neither central to, nor a necessary part of, student’s education. The lack at AUC of such a core curriculum, which deals with the relationship between all disciplines, causes a sense of fragmentation between these disciplines. When studying such a breadth of courses, it was often challenging to regard my education as a single learning enterprise.

As a liberal arts student, I have often experienced myself as a pluralist or relativist. Because the liberal arts model emphasises intellectual and moral development rather than the uncritical acquisition of instrumental knowledge for professional use, liberal arts students experience knowledge not in directly applicable terms, but as a series of suggestive possibilities to make sense of the world. My fellow students studying professionally-oriented degrees, such as law, engineering, or economics are familiar with the applied utility of their course contents. In my own experience, foregoing a concrete application of knowledge to the real-world often means students leave the classroom not knowing what to make of their course content. Where no external scale to gauge the
value of a particular theory exists, as legal sources can be measured for example in terms of ‘authoritativeness’, it is difficult to assent one theoretical worldview over another. Whilst avoiding the perennial debate of universalism versus relativism, the radical pluralism that I commonly see in liberal arts students does not seem conducive to proper intellectual development to me.

Although this reflection of a liberal arts education describes the liberal arts student primarily in their role as an acquirer of theoretical knowledge, it can be taken as analogous to their role as a citizen and professional. I have realised that a way of thinking or area of knowledge initially beyond my interests might be just as legitimate as those familiar to myself. This, I think, is directly applicable to cultivating a toleration and acceptance of those perspectives, which may intuitively appear unreasonable. It is such pluralism, toleration, and the view that collaboration is the key to professional success, that only my liberal arts education could have imparted on me.

Nathan Cooper is a graduate of Amsterdam University College. He studied Liberal Arts and Sciences, with a concentration in Political Philosophy. His bachelor thesis interrogates contemporary UK counter-radicalisation policy through Arendt’s conception of the political and citizenship. His interest in the liberal arts explores the possibilities and limitations of the European University College in educating politically engaged and critical European citizens. Nathan will pursue his research interests of analysing current political trends from a philosophically-informed perspective during his MA in Global Affairs at Leiden University.
I’m a perfectionist. I cannot begin a paper unless I find the perfect first sentence. A first sentence defines the piece it begins. It sets the tone for what’s to come, for what the reader can expect. A conventional university education, in some ways, is like that. The prospective student applies to study a specific subject area. Sometimes, they may be able to add a minor and so focus on two subjects. But whatever they do choose to focus on, that choice defines the three-to-four years that students usually spend at university. And – as Oscar Wilde pointed out – to define is to limit. If I choose to study law, I cannot do philosophy courses; If I do medicine, I won’t be able to academically pursue my interest in Middle Eastern culture. Depending on the university, I may even be able to participate in – and get credited for – a few courses outside of ‘my’ subject area. But what if I then realise that I actually prefer philosophy to law, that I think studying philosophy might ultimately make me happier? Evidently, it is possible to switch majors and minors. Such a switch, however, tends to mean a loss of previously gained credits and, in a sense, a loss of time previously invested to earn them. For all relevant academic purposes, a switch resets my accomplishments to zero. So though I may be free to reconsider my choice of subject, I cannot act upon this reconsideration without feeling like I’m being punished. Punished for pursuing what I now believe to be my main academic interest. Punished for not immediately knowing what I want my career – the thing I believe I’ll pursue for a good part of my future life – to be based on. So maybe I’ll reconsider the switch. Maybe I don’t want to feel like I’ve lost the two years I have already invested in my law-degree. Maybe I’ll give in to doubts about my suitability for a philosophy-bachelor or the latter’s usefulness when later looking for a job. Yes, maybe I’ll stick to law.

Any maybe I won’t regret that later in life.

But maybe I will.

Maybe I will.
And in that case, it would be rather easy to then blame my university – for, given all the perceived punishment they’d have inflicted on me for switching majors, it seems like it’s not really my fault that I didn’t do it after all. If a choice is linked to a high amount of (perceived) costs, it is not as easy as it would otherwise be to blame the individual for not making that choice, for continuing with the degree in law despite being aware that it might ultimately not make them happy.

A liberal education doesn’t give you that way out.

Here, students are not asked to define their academic careers before even beginning it. In liberal education, students’ first choice of subject does not limit them. It is always possible to go back on previous choices, a way, indeed, that won’t leave you feeling punished and unaccomplished. Of course, there exist rules governing course choices, but these amount only to a tiny fragment of the rules governing such choices in conventional education. In liberal education, the content of your education is determined by your current rather than a past self – regardless of its academic background.

Now, the freedom I have in liberal education does not only give me a greater capacity to choose courses, but it also means that I cannot escape making important choices in the way I can in conventional education – by reference to the associated costs. For lack of a better analogy, course choice in liberal education is like grocery shopping for yourself: it’s completely up to you what you buy. And that feels great, it really does. But it’s also scary. Because if you choose the wrong course – or only buy unhealthy or unethically produced food – you’ll have no one to blame but yourself if you end up unhappy – or fat. The same, however, goes for not choosing a course – or forgetting to buy some vital food. It also goes for waiting too long to choose the courses you really want to do – or putting off doing groceries. For you might just find that now you won’t have time to do all the philosophy courses you wanted to do before you graduate – or that the supermarket is now out of half the ingredients you need to make that amazing Thai curry your friends told you about. Again, you’ll be left with only yourself to blame.

Overall, if in a liberal education I realise that I’d rather do philosophy than, as originally planned, law, I am not only better able to follow this passion but will also feel more compelled to do so.
Indeed, when I came to this precise realisation in my first year at University College Maastricht, I felt happy rather than scared. I knew I was at a place where I could easily concentrate to focus on philosophy rather than law from now on, a place where not only other students but also tutors and staff would not only understand but support my decision to do so. I was also aware that I needn’t worry about having enough philosophy courses to choose from – a liberal university, after all, is prepared for cases like me and offers large numbers of courses from a wide variety of academic disciplines.

I believe that a liberal education not only allows students to discover their academic passions but it also, in a sense, forces them to follow those passions. In addition, I believe that is a good thing. In societies where so many people dread going to work every morning, where so many people think of their job as a necessary means to earn money but not as something that fulfils them or contributes to their overall happiness, I appreciate liberal education for not merely making it easier but more or less inevitable to discover and follow one’s academic passions.

Jeannine Bringmann was born in Germany, but has always enjoyed living and learning in other countries. After living in the UK and France for a few months respectively, Jeannine started studying Liberal Arts and Sciences at University College Maastricht in the Netherlands in 2013. In her first year, she discovered her passion for analytical philosophy and has since focused her education on philosophy, political theory, and sociology. Having graduated in 2016, Jeannine is currently doing a Masters in political philosophy in Barcelona, and hopes to do a PhD after.
In the beginning, things can go in many ways. In every new venture, there is a period when several different visions of what this enterprise could be struggle to figure out what they are about, and seek to define it. This can be a confusing time, as it is not yet clear what the new thing is even though it’s already there. This was certainly true of studying at University College Utrecht, the very first Liberal Arts College in the Netherlands and one of the first institutions in Western Europe dedicated to this educational model, just after it opened in 1998. Liberal arts was a largely unknown concept. No one had graduated from such a programme or been accepted for graduate study, let alone found a job. Hans Adriaansens, the founding Dean of the programme, had assured students and their parents that things would work out marvellously, and done so with gusto. Moreover, students were aware of the position liberal education had in the US, and while this was somewhat reassuring, assertions that University College Utrecht would be “Harvard under the Dom” did strike some as hyperbolic. But there was a campus, courses, students and, most importantly, an Open Curriculum. Students were free to pick the courses they were interested in, and this was a major selling point for many of them.

An Open Curriculum is simply a way of structuring a degree programme. But there are many different ways of understanding what it is for, which appeal to different people. And, in those first years, students at University College Utrecht had many different interpretations of it. While distribution requirements, core courses, and major obligations constrained them, different students brought radically different attitudes to bear on how they used the freedom the Open Curriculum gave them. Some, the Renaissance men and women, saw it as an opportunity to study everything, from physics to history, from economics to Shakespeare, because they simply saw all these subjects and disciplines as important ways of understanding the human condition. An Open Curriculum was, to them, an opportunity to avoid choosing. On the other hand, for the Tailors, an Open Curriculum was a way of being able to...
choose precisely what they wanted. Their interests were specific and highly individual, and could not be catered for in traditional programmes; they weren’t interested in law, they were interested in how psychology could be used in criminal proceedings. Studying questions and approaches that do not relate to this was, to them, a waste of time. Then there were the Shoppers. They had no idea what they were passionate about, and figured that if they simply used the Open Curriculum to try different courses, at some point something would grab them, and they would take things from there. Lastly, there were the Avoiders, who were primarily concerned with what they were not interested in. They saw in an Open Curriculum a way of avoiding certain courses or approaches, for example doing economics without the mathematics.

Naturally, the different, and often implicit, understandings of what it was that different students were doing led to many misunderstandings and even some irritation. Renaissancers would embrace distribution requirements, petitioning for extra courses, while Avoiders dreaded them as necessary evils. The former would think the latter intellectual cowards, while the latter would regard the former as eager beavers, who were stressing everyone out with their lust for extra work. Tailors would plan their entire three years at the outset, and panic when courses were offered at the same time. Shoppers found such planning obsessive compulsive, an attitude derided, in turn, by the Tailors, who regarded the Shoppers as simply not serious about their future. Tailors wondered how Renaissancers would ever find a job, while Renaissancers felt the focus of the Tailors was bourgeois. Shoppers regarded Avoiders as closed minded, and Avoiders were sure shoppers would come to regret that course in game theory.

For some, these different approaches and attitudes would cause a sense of division. As one Renaissance man once said to another about Avoiders: we tolerate their presence because their grades are so much lower. The lack of agreement about what the point of the Open Curriculum is could make some students regard others as not really proper liberal arts students, who made it harder to define the College, and liberal arts in the Netherlands, in their preferred way. Because that was still so open, but the way in which it would eventually be defined would have serious consequences for how the degree would be regarded, this sometimes led to considerable insecurity and tension.
Now, almost 20 years later, it probably still is not exactly clear what liberal arts and the Open Curriculum are. There are still Renaissance men and women, Tailors, Shoppers and Avoiders in many programmes. And perhaps there are still some frictions between them concerning what the proper liberal arts attitude is. But it matters less. Because if the development of liberal education has taught us anything, it is that there is a place for students with all kinds of motivations and ambitions in these programmes. Renaissance can do all the things they want to do, Tailors can create the programme that matches their interests, Shoppers usually find their passion eventually, and Avoiders get where they need to be, in one way or the other. Being able to incorporate all these different motivations is not a weakness. It is a strength, because it means that liberal arts can be what all kinds of students need it to be. And it allows students to rethink their attitudes, by interacting with others. Shoppers can become Tailors, or even Renaissance. Avoiders can be persuaded to tailor. And Tailors can be convinced to shop. Perhaps that is the true meaning of the Open Curriculum, not merely being open to different attitudes, but open to a process of exploration and self-definition, which allows students to define what liberal arts is for them. So, next time you get annoyed about the motivations and ambitions of other students, do not judge them, but embrace them, realising that if liberal arts is only one thing, it is nothing.

Teun J. Dekker is Vice-Dean of Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Political Philosophy at University College Maastricht. He did his Bachelor’s degree at University College Utrecht, starting in 1999, soon after it opened. At UCU, he did a double major in Social Sciences and Humanities. He undertook graduate studies in Political Philosophy at Oxford University, and has held visiting research positions at Yale University and Amherst College, where he was Karl M. Loewenstein Fellow in Political Science and Jurisprudence.
Why have I, a seventeen-year-old Russian girl, chosen a liberal arts education? I have graduated from the gymnasium, which was founded by Emperor Alexander I, one of the oldest educational institutions in Russia – children of the Russian poet A. S. Pushkin already studied there. Despite its age, this school does nevertheless belong to the most progressive schools in our country. While I was still studying there, my family and I thought about how I should proceed, which higher education to pursue after graduation. And we concluded that the best opportunities would await me with the model of liberal education, implemented by the faculty which is situated at the palace next to my home, so we heard about it a lot. It is this model, we thought, which best meets the world’s urgent needs of development and civilisational progress. The opportunity to pursue such an education was provided by the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at St. Petersburg State University (Smolny College), the first Russian institutions of higher learning dedicated to offering its students a liberal education. I applied and I was accepted.

The moment when I, as a first year student, visited my college for the first time now divides my life into two parts: before and after. The first lectures, the first meetings with new people, the first attempts to think differently were a breath of fresh air for me…
The ‘system’ of liberal arts and sciences is not easy to understand and, if we look at its history, its development posed some problems. Leaving the port, you need to know where to float. This system features a flexible curriculum that combines the breadth of disciplinary coverage with in depth study of chosen subjects, encouraging interdisciplinarity and providing students with the greatest possible freedom to make own decisions. In addition, it is an educational model that is implemented through an interactive pedagogy focused on the student. Instead of offering classical lectures, it strongly engages students through working with texts in the classroom and beyond.

The cornerstone of education in the liberal arts and sciences model is the development of the individual, rather than the preparation for a specific career. If we think of the Greek roots of this model, we can see that its main purpose was to raise independent citizens who were able to become active participants in a democratic society. Nowadays, it is designed to promote students even further, preparing them not only for deliberation and political engagement but also for work in a dynamic social and economic environment. Proponents of the model of liberal arts and sciences believe that love of learning, critical thinking, and self-expression have a greater value to life than the depth of knowledge in one subject. These qualities are particularly important because they allow graduates to adapt to the changing socio-economic conditions and help them to grow, to learn and to adapt to the new conditions many years after graduation.

Progress cannot stand ambiguity. It is not productive to know that you know nothing. On the other hand, traditional paradigms, which give only one answer to important questions, also prevent progress. As there is no one answer to one question, there is no one answer to all the questions. What is the solution of the problem when every discipline gives its own answer to a general question? If we all were studying “something useful” and became narrow specialists, I’m afraid; we were to lose the last piece of understanding between each other. And I believe that liberal education is not only about the system or the concept of education as such – it is about people: people who are ready to develop the world, who are ready to interact, who are ready to work out a universal language of knowledge. These people – both students and teachers – are not afraid of doubts, uncertainty, and suspense.
They try to find themselves. I am convinced that the first university experiences form an important transformational phase in young people’s lives, who here crystallise their own within the numerous opportunities.

A lot of people speak about being successful. But what is that supposed to mean? Does it actually mean having a job? I hope that there are people who think that they are successful when they like what they do and do what they like to do.

I am studying at Smolny College for the second year now. This place is a kind of home not only for students who just start the way of self-knowledge, but also for those who had already tried more narrow educational establishments. The special value of Smolny College is in its uniqueness in the Russian educational system. I already know that my next step will be a further education in the field of cognitive science. From the first days, I was imbued with the special spirit of the faculty and found myself in a cycle of interesting courses, each of which complements the other very unexpectedly. Thus, the acquired knowledge of philosophy allowed me to build the necessary abstractions in the subsequent understanding of quantum physics, and the study of the phenomena of modern music was useful for further study of human perception already within psychophysiology. Moreover, if at the beginning of the journey my future seemed to me vague and submitted to categories such as “Bachelor of Liberal Arts and Sciences with a Specialisation in Cognitive Studies”, then now, in the middle of the second year of education, I understand how the things that I am ready to devote myself to crystallise. It will not be a separate profession, and it will be a complex function, which inevitably corresponds to each person due to its versatility. If someone asks me whether I see myself as a poet, I will answer in the affirmative. On the question of whether I consider myself a programmer, I will answer the same way. And the answer to the question, whether I’m doing science, will also remain the same. Thus, my prospects as a student seem to me bright, because the success of becoming for me is not in the nominal variable that I will be designated at the end of studying, but in the absence of this conditional milestone and the awareness of my independence and permissible labour efficiency already on the current stage: right now I can do what I like, keeping in mind one very important phrase that I, along with many of
After graduating from one of the oldest traditional gymnasiums in Saint Petersburg, Daria Kleeva successfully entered St. Petersburg State University at the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (specialisation: Cognitive Science). Among her interests and achievements are poetry and literature, winning in numerous Russian and International Competitions (such as Pushkin Prize founded by descendants of Alexander Pushkin, especially his great-great-granddaughter Lady Butter); music (graduated from the Musical College of Saint Petersburg Conservatoire with the excellent diploma (specialisation: piano); different achievements in other spheres of interests such as physics, IT, history, social science, performance art; volunteering in large projects such as UN Conference; becoming a member of the International Club of Petersburgers with the badge of honour for high educational success; traveling and meeting new people.

my classmates, heard in the first days of studying - “There are no wrong answers”. My liberal education has shown me how all-round a person can be, and it helped me to find out who I am.
I remember several key things about my five-year diploma studies in the Cultural Studies programme at European Humanities Universities. The first one is the fact that the programme was very eclectic. The eclecticism came partly from the nature of the discipline itself and partly from the fact that neither the programme administration nor the faculty members had a clear idea of what kind of knowledge a curriculum in cultural studies should deliver. For the first two years, we studied many courses in philosophy and our professors kept repeating that we were, indeed, philosophers of culture. In addition, the programme had a focus on studying French culture: so, we had an intensive language course in French as well as courses in French history, art, literature, and philosophy. All this in addition to English and Latin classes and introductory courses in ethics, aesthetics, logics, law, economics, psychology, etc. The university didn’t fall under the regulations of the Bologna process, so control over workload didn’t exist. We had a lot of classes with extensive home assignments every day. I remember that I slept only four hours per night to get prepared for the classes and receive best grades at the end of the semester (that was the condition to keep my tuition-free place).

A second interesting specificity that I remember is that the university managed to attract many great and bright professors from the state-run universities by giving them full freedom in designing their own courses: no need to follow the templates prepared by the Ministry of Education (which has remained the practice till today). Thanks to this regulation, we had inspiring enthusiastic professors who were in love with their research topics and taught them accordingly. Besides, the university invited a lot of visiting professors from Russia, Western Europe, and the U.S. (one of the reasons why the university was eventually closed by the president of Belarus). For me, this also meant the chance to practice English in situations that are more professional by discussing books and
research rather than under the artificial conditions of language courses.

After two years, the administration changed the curriculum quite radically: we moved from the studies of philosophy and French-oriented subjects to the studies of visual culture, namely to criticising traditional art theory, discussing the problems of gender and representation, analysing films and photography, and comparing modernism with postmodernism. We didn’t have courses in critical thinking, academic writing, or creativity but I think everything that I studied in the third, fourth and fifth year was somehow connected to these skills. For me, as a shy girl from a working-class family, it was a challenge to start writing independent critical texts on current problems of culture and society, and then later to speak openly at conferences or roundtable discussions, and to deliver public lectures in Minsk.

At that time, I noticed a radical difference between my university experience and the experience of my schoolmates, the guys of the same cohort, who were getting their professional degrees from the state universities. I was fluent in oral and written English, and I knew French, while they could say just a few words about themselves in basic English. I had an independent critical opinion about a variety of topics while they were experts only in a very narrow field of their specialisation.

At the same time, they knew very well where they were going to work after graduation, while I had only a very vague idea. With my diploma (with merit) in hands, I tried to get a job at an art magazine, but I was told that my specialisation in cultural studies was too exotic and that the editor doubted my qualification to write about art. I also approached a travel agency, but they said that they could offer me only a job as an office girl. Later, I started working as an office girl for a small company, and I stayed there for one year just to understand that I wasn’t able to tolerate the level of misogyny that rules in the business world.

I finally became aware that I could apply my knowledge to the fullest only in academia. I was passionate about learning and was so grateful to EHU for bringing about the profound change in my world view which I had experienced there that I wanted to help other children, especially children from working class families, to understand and enjoy the world of culture and arts, to learn how to
think critically, and how to be creative. This is how and why, in the end, I decided to become a teacher and jump back into the work of academia.

Svetlana Poleschuk was born in Belarus and received her education in cultural studies (the European Humanities University, Minsk, 1998-2003), commencing her education in Poland in the field of cultural sociology. At the same time, Svetlana continued working at her alma mater, the European Humanities University, which, for political reasons, was forced to move from Minsk to Vilnius, becoming a university in exile. Svetlana taught courses on the history of photography, art criticism, and academic writing and published articles on Belarusian art in numerous local and international magazines. In 2015 Svetlana received MA degree in the field of Sociology and Social Anthropology from the Central European University. Her research project explored a new phenomenon of public lectures in Belarus as a case study in cultural autonomy and political agency. Since 2015 Svetlana has been working on her PhD project at the Department of Political and Social Sciences at the European University Institute in Florence.
At the end of secondary school, I was not sure what to study next. I was passionate about theatre, so a degree in theatre studies seemed an obvious choice. But I had other interests as well; I had taken a class in art history at the University of Tilburg as part of a programme for excellent secondary school students. Although I very much enjoyed this, I was not convinced that I wanted to study art history only.

Then my tutor told me about the Dutch university colleges that offered a liberal arts education. There you did not have to limit your field of study to one area, but instead, you could combine different subjects. Since I had no clear idea of what I wanted to do after my studies, the prospect of keeping my options open through a liberal arts education appealed to me. What I liked was that most Dutch university colleges were small-sized institutions, with classes of around twenty people, and curricula taught in English. That last element was interesting to me as I had always enjoyed English as a subject and wanted to be part of an international student body that an English-taught programme was likely to attract.

I looked into two university colleges that I was aware of at that time (in 2009): University College Utrecht and University College Roosevelt (UCR) in Middelburg, which was still called Roosevelt Academy back then. The newly established university college in Amsterdam did not offer any theatre courses, which I was certain I wanted to do, whereas I did not want to study at a big university like the one in Tilburg (which offered a liberal arts degree but not in a university college), so I did not consider those. After browsing the course catalogue of UCR, I discovered that I could do both subjects I wanted to study there: theatre studies and art history.

What made UCR even more appealing was the fact that it offered a possibility of combining theory and practice. A performance track, consisting of conservatoire level music lessons, was available along
with academic courses in my disciplines (today, UCR also offers an art and design track with practical art classes). Having taken piano lessons from an early age, this was particularly valuable to me as the UCR curriculum took away the need to choose between a conservatoire and a university education, and instead allowed me to combine the two. In that sense, UCR offered precisely what no other university in the Netherlands did: a liberal arts education that allowed me to study a combination of the subjects that I was interested in, and continue my practical music studies. I applied to UCR and studied there for three years.

Of course, there were limitations. Students at UCR cannot simply study twenty unrelated courses; they have to choose a major within one of the departments (sciences, social sciences or arts, and humanities) and complete two or three tracks (a set of courses in a field of study) within that major, plus some obligatory courses like academic English and methods and statistics. Because I entered the performance track, I was required to complete the musicology track as well – something that I had not planned in advance. Compulsory courses and my majors took up the whole 24 courses UCR students can take – so I could not study art history after all. On the upside, I turned out to really enjoy musicology, and after UCR I even completed an MA in this discipline - something that I would never have considered if I would not have been required to take those courses at UCR. All courses were graded through a combination of exams, academic writing and presenting, which furthermore led me to develop my presentation skills.

A downside of combining different tracks was that there was less time to get fully immersed in a subject than there would have been in a single-subject curriculum. Since I studied theatre as part of one of the several tracks within a liberal arts education, my understanding of theatre studies is likely to be more limited than that of a student who did a BA in theatre. This is the compromise one opts for by studying Liberal Arts: what is gained in breadth is lost in depth. A possible knowledge gap could, however, be filled later, for example with a Master’s degree.

The liberal arts system at UCR requires students to take at least one course outside their own department. Though I liked the idea of broadening my horizons by studying fields that I would not otherwise have developed an interest in, I was not too happy
with this requirement. Compulsory courses in sciences and social sciences occupied valuable space in my curriculum without any long-term benefits from my point of view. Of course, other students may feel differently about this and ideally may have discovered new areas of interest, just like I discovered musicology when I was required to study it (although that requirement was part of my major).

A key advantage of studying at UCR was living in the small and charming provincial city of Middelburg that proved safe and comforting surroundings for a student living away from home for the first time. All students at UCR, approximately 40% of which are international according to UCR’s website, are required to live on campus, which, although I found it a bit daunting at the beginning, I can only applaud in retrospect. The university college made sure rent was affordable; living together next to your fellow students only minutes from the university made working together easy to arrange, and there were always people around to have a cup of tea with late at night. UCR students really formed a strong, close-knit community (that some even called a ‘bubble’) and I made some of my closest friends there, which is perhaps the most important reason why I have such nostalgic feelings towards my time there.

My overall experience of studying liberal arts and sciences at UCR has been better than I could have imagined. The interdisciplinary background that I gained there has been crucial for my further studies; I would not have been a PhD student in a musical theatre without my combined education in theatre studies and musicology from UCR. I never regretted choosing the liberal arts and sciences path, nor going to this particular university college (I rather sometimes wish I could go back there!). It has been a perfect fit for me, and I continue to recommend my choice to others.

Sanne Thierens studied liberal arts and sciences at University College Roosevelt in Middelburg, The Netherlands, from 2009 to 2012. Since completing a Master’s degree in musicology at King’s College London, she has been researching the musicals by Annie M.G. Schmidt and Harry Bannink (1965-1984) as a PhD student at the University of Winchester in England.
Liberal education, for me, embodies an ambiguity that, I believe, many people face since the 1970s. This controversy, which often causes a dispute in my head, mainly results from the merging of humanistic and artistic ideals with capitalist production. Questions arise whether capitalism is something good or bad, whether humanity could create something better or we should even try. Going through a liberal education surely enforces inner struggles within me, dealing with those questions.

For me, liberal education means having choices and responsibility. Certainly, there were people who supported me throughout my studies, but in the end, it was my curriculum. Again and again I had to decide which paths to walk and which future to choose.

To be able to make so many choices meant having numerous possibilities. In my opinion, having many possibilities in designing one’s future is a strong indicator for having a very privileged position. A liberal education is a privilege. Unfortunately, it is a privilege only accessible to a very limited number of people. I believe that privilege should go hand in hand with responsibility. As I see it, however, many privileges are not being perceived as such, and only a few are accepted responsibly.

Concerning the latter, a liberal education is different. To be fair, the possibility to enjoy a liberal education may be a given privilege that comes with little sense of responsibility for many of the chosen ones – people from mainly Western societies that are financially and mentally supported by relatives and thus able to afford aiming at a degree connected to insecurity and to come through the tough selection processes. But during a liberal education, I think almost anyone can learn personal responsibility. Choosing a liberal education has certainly not meant choosing an easy and predefined path. With a liberal education, you can basically design your own degree. This requires consideration, reflection, and especially doubt – continuous and lots of doubt.
This is the first point I would like to emphasise. In the end, I believe, continuous reflection and omnipresent doubt, and the high level of personal responsibility can make people become more self-aware and self-critical, considerate and sensitive. Of course, at times it might also make people feel lost, have an overarching self-esteem, or vanish in a bubble. And still, many people that went through a liberal education are people whom I regard to have eventually become empowered, tough, strongly (self-)reflective and, we might very carefully say, to some extent enlightened. Moreover, I think it has made people aware of how many privileges we Westerners have, and that enjoying a liberal education is one of them.

But – as always – there also is a downside to my story of liberal education. Because the attributes that I see people acquiring through a liberal education correspond to that what Chiapello and Boltanski called the third spirit of capitalism a spirit, or so the idea, that accompanies economic neoliberalism since the 1970s and permeates through all our societal structures and lives. A liberal education here matches the ideals of neoliberal capitalism, as it produces human capital in the form of a flexible employable, autonomous, and creatively innovative workforce. This is the second major point that should be taken into consideration when thinking about current liberal education in my opinion. Yes, I do think that liberal education aims at blasting old societal structures and is revolutionary. Yes, I do think that it is revolutionary in burying the second spirit of Taylorist capitalism and its rigid structures, hierarchies, mass-everything, formality, and conformity, but with it a sense of social security. However, I do not see how it could contradict and work against capitalism and its ideals of capital accumulation, market-liberalism, comprehensive competitiveness, and the inherent exploitations of capitalism. For me, liberal education rather corresponds to the latest developments in capitalist societies. Whether one likes or dislikes this will certainly vary with context. I guess that many people are, like me, torn. Foremost, awareness is crucial.

Out of a liberal education, I believe, people might both perfectly fit into, and endanger neoliberalism. This leaves room for thought. The individual outcome surely depends on the individual’s background and context but as well on the knowledge provided. I thus conclude that it should be regarded as crucial that the neoliberal traits of a liberal education are extensively discussed throughout the course of studies. I think that an examination of different
critiques of capitalism should be an integral part of a liberal education. According to Chiapello and Boltanski, this might lead liberally educated people to unwittingly incorporated old critiques into a new and enforced version of capitalism. In my opinion, that is a risk worth taking if we want students not simply to follow neoliberal educational paths but to learn responsibility, nuanced reflection, and critical thinking. Maybe such people can even make capitalism into something better. Maybe, to end on an optimistic note, if something like a liberal education could be made accessible to everyone and no longer a privilege and potential source of neoliberal leaders, humanity might be able to create something that is not based on exploitation. In my view, it is crucial that such an education would not be uniform. It should enable all people to become respectful, responsible and reflective in all the different ways the multiplicity of humankind has to offer. Maybe this can enable more of us to have more positive choices concerning our life paths. Maybe such choices could then become less a privilege and more a matter of course for everyone.

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In Europe, liberal arts programmes often describe themselves using buzzwords; such as ‘critical thinking’, ‘interdisciplinary learning’ and ‘individualised curricula.’ In my opinion, however, it is questionable whether liberal education should be described in such a way. In fact, I wonder whether European ‘liberal education of the twenty-first century’ should be called liberal education at all.

Throughout the twentieth century, thinkers such as Leo Strauss and Jacob Klein have produced magnificent essays on liberal education. Both of them emphasise that liberal education entails the need for “radical questioning” and “the boldness implied in the resolve to regard the accepted views as mere opinions” respectively. From this follows a first characteristic of liberal education proper: its curriculum and classroom modus are centred around questions and questioning. This implies an openness to any type of question, including ‘what is liberal education?’ In other words, it is pertinent that students and professors alike reflect on what they are doing and why they are doing it. An integral part of liberal education is reflecting on the aims and goals of education and its importance to us as human beings.

Radical questioning is often associated with critical thinking, but this association is out of place. Asking questions implies the belief that answers exist, even if we are not capable of finding them. In other words, questioning implies the possibility of knowledge, of truth. An education, then, based on questioning, conveys the belief that truth exists. A student is someone who does not (yet) know, but wants to become knowledgeable. Critical thinking, on the other hand, presumes that one already knows. The word ‘critical’ finds its root in the Greek word kritikos which means ‘of or for judging’. Thinking in order to judge can only take place after one has obtained an understanding of the matter at hand. In this sense, liberal education precedes and cannot be equated with ‘critical thinking’, as it aims for understanding. It aims to build rather than to break down.
The next question is how understanding is obtained. Liberal education is often described as interdisciplinary – as a means to connect the methods and principles of different disciplines with one another – but I would again claim this description to be inadequate and incomplete. It obscures the fact that there are questions that fall outside of disciplinary boundaries, but are pertinent to us as human beings. In a sense it would be better to describe liberal education as pre-disciplinary education: both because the questions it concerns cannot always be captured by an (inter)disciplinary setting and because a training in liberal education will often be followed by a specialisation within a certain discipline.

In order to facilitate questioning that aims to enlighten our understanding of human nature, it is necessary to look for the proper teachers. These are not normally those men and women that stand in front of the classrooms in our schools and universities, as they, in turn, continue to be taught by others. Instead, we must find those teachers who – in the words of Strauss – are not in turn pupils. In other words, we must try finding the greatest minds that inhabited this earth, and we must turn to the Great Books as a starting point of education. Every generation has the task of beginning a new dialogue with and between these great monologues. This is not to say that these ‘incomparable mirrors of mankind’ are the only proper object of study, neither that these works are beyond any fault and stand all scrutiny; they are simple the best we have as their continued reception gives rises to the suspicion that their content provides truthful answers to questions about the human condition.

This brings us to the goal of liberal education. I experience liberal education to be deeply personal, as it aims, through radical questioning, to illuminate what it is to be human. Indeed, with Klein, I would say that ‘liberal education presumes that man’s most specific character is his desire to know.’ As such, it is the freedom of being capable to formulate our own personal answers to the questions that any human necessarily faces. It is a way to understand oneself; one’s place in the world and one’s relation to others.

The argument I presented here – in a blunt and summarised form – is the traditional argument in favour of the great books programmes normally found in the United States. Once I found myself in the lucky position to attend such a programme at the
Jacob van de Beeten studied the Academy Year Programme at the former European College of Liberal Arts in Berlin. He also obtained a BA degree in Liberal Arts from Leiden University College in The Hague, The Netherlands. It is the irreconcilable difference between these programmes that sparked his interest in the meaning and purpose of Liberal Education. He is currently studying French political history at Sciences Po, Paris and will begin an LLM at LSE, London in the fall of 2017.

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Choose! Follow your interests, and see where it goes! And Get Lost!, the coordinator of Studium Individuale in Lüneburg told us in late 2013. I had moved to Lüneburg some weeks ago and was beginning to find my way around.

Two weeks before, we had been sitting in the old and cold church of Lüneburg where the President had welcomed us freshmen and said: At Leuphana, we want you to follow your motivations, to create your own paths, your own ideas, and design your own course of action.

For me, liberal arts is all about being able to exercise choice. I recall the mixture of excitement and intimidation that I felt when I looked at the university calendar in the beginning. The sheer number of disciplines, courses, and lectures we could potentially take was mind-boggling! In addition, I recall how a few weeks later I was proud to have assembled my very personal schedule with Law on Mondays and Wednesdays, Economics and Philosophy on Tuesdays and Fridays.

I also remember how I got frustrated with the disciplinary structures of Law and Economics at the end of the first year. The digital media and cultural theory seminar I had taken with friends was just much more interesting. Because of this, throughout the semester break, I felt anxious about what would happen in the following semester. In the end, I decided to leave Law and Economics and switch to digital media. So I worked on reasons that would justify the change and presented them to my supervisors. And it turned out that they were very supportive!

Thereafter, the journey into the second year proved to be full of discovery and excitement again. While many things were different in this year, I also soon realised that not everything was new and that I could take some questions that I had encountered in Law and Economics before, with me. In my new classes, among other things, we looked at how digital subjects are created by corporations and governments as well as by economic imperatives. I could
relate this to some of what I had done earlier. I eventually started working through concepts like corporate personhood and homo economicus to understand how they could be digitised through technologies like block-chains and social media algorithms that claim to know the behaviors and even desires of humans.

In the third year, I however also grew a bit weary about the choices I had made and wondered what the context was within which I had and continue to take these. I realised that Leuphana is a quite homogenous space where many of us students come from middle-class backgrounds, spent a year volunteering abroad before entering university, and speak at least three languages. Coming from middle-class background myself, it was easy for me to blend in, make friends and join in on the enthusiasm of a provocative model of education. I started to feel like I was living in a kind of a bubble and asked myself: How does this model of choice work? Who gets to choose and design a path and really own it? And don’t we students, in the end, all choose the same thing – social sameness?

Outside of the university, I was often asked what kind of job I would do once I had the degree in my hands and I often struggled, looking for the right words when I didn’t really know where it would lead me to. In these moments, I indeed felt lost and was looking for ways to get back on track. I would then turn to friends, parents, and supervisors who supported the choices I took and believed in me – who gave me the time and assurance it needed to be a person.

It has not been the easiest of journeys with Studium Individuale, but it has certainly been an insightful one. Being able to choose what I study is, I believe, a step towards a re-humanisation of higher education within a streamlined environment. It is what liberal arts is for me and, hopefully, for many others.

Looking back at the time in Lüneburg, however, I also notice a discomfort with the homogeneous environment I found myself in. And it is for this reason that I want to ask what the existing and the possible geographies of liberal arts education are? Would it, for instance, be possible to establish a programme in the northern part of Dortmund or Parisian banlieues? How can the social support system that is needed to study be taken into account as a major factor? And how can the privilege of getting to choose be made available to more people?
I guess answering these questions requires some introspection, since first of all, it requires an admission, and then, an awareness that our ability to pursue our interests – educational or otherwise – is actually a privilege. Our capacity to steep ourselves in certain pedagogical structures, or to take certain lifestyles for granted, and even have our existential crises at university, are made possible only because of the peculiar class backgrounds and consequent aspirations we have grown in. Creating a more inclusive and less homogenous environment would then require us to step out of our emotional comfort zones, and ask ourselves some difficult questions about who we are and who we want to be. It will involve us questioning everything familiar and comfortable, and everything we hold dear to ourselves, to ask: do our best experiences merely reproduce our hegemony instead of initiating transformation, which produces real change? These thoughts are not easy to deal with. There have been enough days when they have haunted me to the point that I have been unable to get out of bed. But I dare say, isn’t this what education is all about? A constant quest to deconstruct your own assumptions? To shake yourself out of your own comfort zone? This process of self-realisation might not make every day as bright as the other, but it certainly makes living worth it.

Leon Kaiser studied Liberal Arts under the Studium Inviduale at Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg from 2013-2017. His interests lie in the political and cultural aspects of digital media, and its relationship to the wider paradigm of gender, class, and ethnicity. He additionally holds a deep interest in the problems and methodologies of academic research, and is working on a chapter on the challenges of undergraduate research for a guide on Liberal Education. He currently works as a student assistant at Leuphana Universität with Prof. Achatz von Müller where he provides guiding assistance for a course on Interdisciplinarity. Currently, he is also involved in developing research around the formulation of trust in the context of blockchains and cryptocurrencies for his Bachelorarbeit at Leuphana University.
Some time after a microcosmic Big Bang, much less than a tut on the lips of the universe, I can recall a sense of beginning. The state of things then, as my present Being reflects on that somewhat murky awareness, amounts to one of the inseparability of Being and Learning. Each was each-Other, neither claiming independence, neither naming themselves, but moving together as ‘I am’. Time mattered less than matter, and space meant room to explore. Freed by innate content and adaptability, the callings of mind and body, intuition and curiosity, ventured somewhat erratically together, experimenting with error and success. Fingers were burned by forbidden hot things and plants squeezed their stinging fluids into them; dark mud oozed through them, moulding its shape into creatures and marking all that was clean.

As Time secretly counted these halcyon days of temperate adventure, Time announced its significance, and began to matter. The day came for delivery into the spacious halls of instruction, where the blood of generations was centrifuged and separated by measure and, in those days, even by sex. Here, time was to order, to stream the stream of consciousness, to fulfil quantitative requirements, to be qualified and distributed, to be set on a designated course. Here, learning became publicly owned and was named the law of nature. It was lifted out of Being as principle and purpose, confined to matter, to specified time and place, to ink and books, remembering and repetition. We marched an arm’s length apart, sat in regimental formations, and were taught by the venerable Sirs that everything within these walls was the inarguable truth. Being moved in its shadow, quarantined beyond by its incongruous haphazardness. It was play, pastimes and parties, friends and fun, laughing, crying and love, all the encounters of disordered spirits, of sensual embodiment, of wildnesses.

In my Now, after more than three years’ of a liberal arts study that is underpinned by the exploration of what it is to be human, I view this particular history, this fabricated duality both singular
and collective, through that frame. For many of my peers such regimental rigidity, compared with the fun and freedoms of the world outside, cultured a distaste for school. It blurred the fragile distinction between the disciplined institutional structure of formal education and what Learning is itself. The fortunate child finds, if unknowingly, a way to overcome, to reconnect Being and Learning, a portal through which to love both, so that structured Learning makes new sense of the Sensible, to learn while being, and so that Being is allowed to continue to be curious, to Be while learning. This is the raising one’s eyes above the parapet to view a more complete, if complex, landscape of Being. For myself, I realise that which lifted me high, bridging the space between, was drawing, but it might equally have been studying the bones of dinosaurs, the dynamism of machines, flora, or the planets and stars. Unlike writing and apart from the schematic diagrams elaborating science, drawing was largely free of responsibility, of measurement and mark. It brought subjectivity to sense, connect and imagine. It resurrected histories as I drew longboats with Vikings in wool and furs, or steam trains with Victorians in their crinolines and moleskin. Drawing illuminated past, present and future, breathing life, my life, into an impersonal curriculum, infiltrating the borders of Learning’s official domain with the vibrancy of Being, becoming the secret teacher, the solitary thinker within its walls.
Through it, Learning’s formal world intimated an emotive pulse. Drawing broke an ordered page with colour and brought moments of light-humoured affinity, if brief as a smile, between student and teacher. Being’s vital and imaginative inquiry revealed an unreality of ritual observance, proving it brittle and glassy.

Modern Liberal Arts has expanded on the traditional inclusion of art as that of an orderly musical mathematics. Its holistic programme, reborn through the throes of twentieth century revolutions, realises that the arts, which Plato condemned as deceptive ‘natural magic’ are a natural magic condemned at a loss. The child that I was was oblivious to the potent potentiality that drawing introduced to the structured tasks she was given. She was unaware that its native activity was a soul-forming matter which promised to continue into her adult professional life. At 54 I have drawn in many mediums for many people, from museums to musicians, and of course, for myself, but it has been, it is more than a life of simple illustration. Art is a way to understand and be mystified, to observe and explore, to empathise, to find oneself both at home and at odds, to connect with the world’s vitality, to feel a bond within it and communicate, to work with the awareness of a vital freedom to inquire and a discipline, if ultimately transiently, to resolve. And this is similarly where liberal arts seats its beating heart as a finder and opener of doorways, as a doorway itself through the asking of humanity’s boldest questions. Through undertaking its study, my personal practice, my person, has become aware, informed, has come to know itself, a Self and its Why better, peppered with regret it had not been sooner. Here, for this contribution, the opportunity to reflect on the young stranger I was is to find a past Self-not-yet-departed, for that Self and its experiences still shape me, a being who continues to Be while Learning, and to Learn while Being.

Sem Vine considers art and creativity as a valuable force which permeates every facet of human life. Working for many years as a professional artist in various media for museums to musicians as well as for her own research has enabled her to explore a plethora of subject matter from spirituality to space. As part of the journey integral to her personal and professional work, she graduated from the University of Winchester with a First Class Honours degree in Modern Liberal Arts in 2016, where she was also awarded the MLA Prize 2016 for her dissertation, Art, Alchemy, and Education.
Slightly abbreviated, I have mixed Simon and Garfunkel’s lyrics with a textual journey through my liberal arts education. So, I chose to tell how I perceived my study & the feelings that accompanied it with the help of music.

“You know, we wanted to have some fireworks tonight.”
On my final school day, I, Lukas, who had always been thought never to learn reading nor writing, being dyslexic, finally received a German A-Level exam with grades opening doors at many universities.

“But they did not let us. So, we decided to make the fireworks our own.”
After such a journey, with the curtain of matriculation, a burden fell off me. However, this strange new freedom of choice met a maturing desire to be my own boss, to do it my way.

“Hello darkness, my old friend,
I’ve come to talk with you again”
This growth came with a constant fight in which my knowledge of human creation, the future state of our world, and my desired role in it hit tons and tons of social norms coming from all sides.

“Because a vision softly creeping,
Left its seeds while I was sleeping”
Later, being accepted at a dozen universities for psychology, sociology, and economics courses, I feared focusing on one or some disciplines as something dangerous. Something limiting.
“And the vision that was planted in my brain
Still remains”

Thus, I opted for what offered most: a major in environmental and sustainability studies, with 20% liberal arts + a minor of my choice. And, most importantly: a scholarship for a year in Barcelona.

“Within the sound of silence.”

I hit my road at Leuphana University Lüneburg at a time a new major, Studium Individuale, had just been established, consisting of a crowd I felt alike with and should win many friends from soon.

“And in the naked light I saw
Ten thousand people, maybe more.”

Most fellow students were different; most were at this place with different objectives, liked being close to home, aspiring a certain profession or disciplinary career options.

“People talking without speaking,
People hearing without listening”

My first deed was to play theatre at a seminar, and we wrote about its importance for sustainability. It brought me in contact with definitions, academic writing, and undergraduate publishing.

“People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared”

Have I ever again put the same effort into a paper as I put into my first essay, an essay in which I tracked modern Hungarian cultures of remembrance?

“Disturb the sound of silence.”

In free moments I read about libertarian paternalism, circular economy, and modern Marxism. Fastly, I noticed disciplinary, so to say cultural, differences but made little more of it than grumble about.
“And the people bowed and prayed
  To the neon god they made.”

During the second term, I chose my minor track, trying to take one of the subjects furthest away from sustainability classes (world doom), thus ending up studying E-Business (make money).

“And the sign flashed out its warning,
  In the words that it was forming.”

I put an effort in diversifying, worked as a student consultant, formed a flat with philosophy students, registered myself for a political scholarship, collected ECTS in informatics, even tried out Barcelona.

“And the signs said, ‘The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls
  And tenement halls.’”

It was meant to fail, and it did fail. I disliked the study conditions abroad, I disliked the ecology classes at home, and, even worse, hated my humanities courses, which were merely a glorification of spirits from the past.

“And whispered in the sounds of silence.”

Hence, I studied epistemology and decided to focus on “inter- and transdisciplinary” methods, changed from Barcelona to Vienna, and concentrated on theatre, flat-mates, and family matters.

“When you’re weary, feeling small
  When tears are in your eyes
  I will dry them all”

Is this the promise of liberal education? A comforter of infinite power. Anything goes. I contradict. For example, the informatics class I opted for some days were too sophisticated for my mind.
“I’m on your side
Oh when times get rough
And friends just can’t be found”

On Erasmus abroad, alone in the capital Vienna, the city of theatre, switching between coffee houses and libraries, I touched upon a disciplinary faculty of sociological environmental science.

“Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down”

My longing got to a hold these days, as I adopted the sustainability scientist crowd, breaking away from my liberal arts caste, although rather focused than free, rather disciplined than liberal.

“When you’re down and out
When you’re on the street
When evening falls so hard, I will comfort you”

My subjects were not fatal options anymore; they became a necessity, the medium of independence, disciplinary science, abandoning right and better.

“I’ll take your part
Oh, when darkness comes
And pain is all around”

Hence, with high hopes, I approached my first own project of „relevance“ – a bachelor thesis. I wrote, retreating to an alpine cabin, about disciplinary paradigms in green Information Systems.

“Like a bridge over troubled water
I will lay me down”

Against this backdrop, my study was a salad bowl of experiences. All over the liberal arts, the “multi-, inter- & trans-disciplinary“-hype of un-education accompanied me smoothly, carried me safe.
“Sail on silver boy, sail on by
Your time has come to shine”

I feel to be a designed product of this “anti-bologna education researcher generation,” telling us to take time, celebrating the idea of an entrepreneurial, specialist generalist.

“All your dreams are on their way
See how they shine”

I look at my scholarship foundation crowd. I speak to my friends. They seem free. Undisciplined. Brave. They seem stuffed with the new spirit of capitalism, retailoring their CV daily.

“Oh, if you need a friend
I’m sailing right behind”

Thank you, dear myth of the liberal arts. Thanks for backing us. Backing me. I have had an intimate affair with you. Now I made up my mind to study the discipline of business, so called general management.

“Like a bridge over troubled water
I will ease your mind”

Lukas Törner, born in Bremen, Germany, studied Environmental Sciences and E-Business at Leuphana University Lüneburg (B. Sc.) and at Social Ecology Institute (IFF) Vienna (2012-2016). Now he is enrolled in General Management (M. A.) at Zeppelin University Friedrichshafen. Lukas thoughts currently circulate around a project called transcultural-caravan. There he forms an international research group, which deals with disciplinary and cultural challenges to the management of sustainability reporting. Stay in touch with Lukas via Email: Lukas.toerner@posteo.de
Jakob Tonda Dirksen’s encounters with the philosophy and practice of the liberal arts began during his undergraduate at Leuphana University of Lüneburg, where he was among the initiators and organisers of the 1st European Liberal Education Student Conference. He now often wonders just why he did not learn to appreciate the very liberal artsy schooling which he enjoyed as a pupil, and usually checks his ignorance off as successfully accomplished juvenile sin. In his free time from writing or collecting student voices on liberal education in Europe these days, Jakob reads towards new scholarly endeavours or counts the tiles at the bottom of swimming pools.

Daniel Kontowski is a PhD student at the University of Winchester, where he studies the ideas of the first leaders of the European liberal education movement. He graduated from the University of Warsaw in 2013, with degrees in sociology and “artes liberales” at the College of Inter-Departmental Individual Studies in the Humanities and Collegium Artes Liberales, respectively. Afterwards, he completed a “Diamond Grant” research project comparing American, Dutch, Russian and Polish liberal education initiatives. Daniel held a visiting scholar position at Boston College, was Fulbright Scholar at Wagner College (NY) and is currently an international member of the Center for Higher Education Futures at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. Daniel is a member of the Polish Collegium Invisibile, more info at www.kontowski.com

David Kretz studied philosophy and business in Vienna before enrolling at the European College of Liberal Arts (now Bard College Berlin), Germany’s first liberal education institution. He spent his junior year on exchange at Sciences Po, Paris and returned to the city in the fall of 2016 for a joint MA in Contemporary Philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. Besides liberal education, his main research focus draws on German philosophy to explore what the concept of translation can do for contemporary political theory.
This book is available online at the European Liberal Arts Initiative (ELAI) website: www.liberal-arts.eu. In addition, the website features recommended research literature about liberal arts education in Europe, information about relevant networks, conferences, and other events related to European liberal arts education.

About ELAI

ELAI has been launched to improve the standing of liberal arts in Europe. We consider it our task to raise the awareness of existing institutional arrangements in which liberal arts education already takes place, as well as to provide a platform for debating what it is and can be in the European context. Our hope is to create synergies between many formidable, original and yet diverse liberal arts initiatives populating the continent since at least three decades, and to raise awareness beyond those already involved.

ELAI made it its first task to compile a list of European liberal arts programmes that would be based on solid research, clear methodology, and feedback from featured institutions. We keep this data source open to everybody, regularly updated, and encourage readers to submit their suggestions. More info at www.liberal-arts.eu.
What is Liberal Education and what could it be?

This volume is a collection of European students’ voices on their liberal education. It is not a comparative, scholarly study of student experience in liberal education programmes, although it might serve as a first step towards such an inquiry. Rather, it invites its readers to explore the nature, promises, and pitfalls of liberal education in Europe, and to initiate into the diversity of institutional and curricular arrangements, as they are perceived by those who took part in them.

Researchers and journalists that are already covering liberal education will hopefully find in students’ insider perspectives valuable and original contributions to their field of interest. Their accounts might also offer inspiration and caveats to those administrators, faculty, and sponsors currently running liberal education initiatives or considering doing so in the future. Last but not least, prospective liberal arts students will get a better idea of what to expect, current ones will find that others perhaps share their joys and struggles, and former ones can remember a formative phase in their lives.