



# The Emergence of Liberal Arts and Sciences Education in Europe: A Comparative Perspective

Marijk van der Wende

Amsterdam University College, PO Box 94160, Amsterdam, 1090 GD, The Netherlands.

This article explores the question of why liberal arts and sciences education has been (re-)emerging in Europe over roughly the last two decades. A period, which is also characterized by the Bologna Process, that is the introduction of distinct undergraduate — graduate degree cycles, and the explicit framing of higher education policies within the concept of the knowledge economy (the Lisbon Strategy). It will do so by taking a historical and comparative approach, looking at the histories of liberal arts and sciences education as they evolved in Europe and the USA. The article aims to analyse why liberal arts and science education seems to be a relevant response to the needs for higher education reform in Europe. In particular to the need to differentiate the massified European systems, in terms of broader and more flexible approaches to bachelor education in order to overcome the disadvantages of too early and over-specialization, by re-establishing the balance between breadth and depth of the curriculum, and in terms of redefining elite education in overly egalitarian systems. The focus on Europe will highlight developments in the Netherlands, where the progress of liberal arts and sciences education is particularly substantial and where the model has already obtained a special status within the higher education system. This will be further illustrated using Amsterdam University College as an institutional case study on the new European version of the liberal arts model, with an emphasis on its meaning in the globalized higher education context of the 21st century.

*Higher Education Policy* (2011) 24, 233–253. doi:10.1057/hep.2011.3

**Keywords:** liberal arts; higher education reform; differentiation; Europe; Bologna

---

## Liberal Arts and the Origin of the European University

A ‘liberal arts’ institution can be defined as a ‘college or university with a curriculum aimed at imparting general knowledge and developing general intellectual capacities, in contrast to a professional, vocational, or technical curriculum’ (Encyclopedia Britannica). In terms of institutional characterization, the Carnegie Classification (USA) identifies Baccalaureate Colleges — Liberal Arts as institutions that ‘are primarily undergraduate



colleges with major emphasis on baccalaureate programmes and which award at least half of their baccalaureate degrees in liberal arts fields' (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching website). The terms 'liberal arts' or 'liberal education' are often used as short hand for the more comprehensive term 'liberal arts and sciences education', although it is explicitly recognized that the sciences have their integral place in that concept. 'Despite its antiquity, liberal education is often assumed to be unique to the American Republic — perhaps with roots in other traditions' (Rothblatt, 2003, 1). Indeed, tracing back the history of this particular educational model leads to Europe, as the liberal arts tradition has its origins with the great Greek philosophers and constituted the basis of the medieval university in Europe (Nussbaum, 1997; Glyer and Weeks, 1998). The curriculum of the early European universities was organized around the seven liberal arts, which were divided into the *Trivium* (literary arts: grammar, logic, and rhetoric) and the *Quadrivium* (mathematical arts: arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy), all together focusing on the education of the 'whole' or 'well-rounded' person. This initial part of university education formed the basis for further, advanced level training in the main professions of that time, such as medicine, law, and theology. This is also how the *Athenaeum Illustre*, the predecessor of the University of Amsterdam, which was established in 1632, was structured. The collegiate model, that is the smaller-scale college context preferred for the liberal arts experience, also has clear historical roots in the early European universities, for example Oxford and Cambridge.

Rothblatt recognizes the European origins of the model, but also notes that, 'While liberal education has never exactly vanished from the European educational agenda, it has been decidedly low on the scale of priorities' (2003, 5). Furthermore, he writes, 'Liberal education is something of an educational industry in the USA as nowhere else' (2003, 1). This does of course not imply that it is free of critique, as witnessed by a flow of recent publications (see for instance AAC&U, 2005, 2007; Bok, 2006; Levine, 2006; Lewis, 2006), which will be discussed in more detail later in this article.

In order to answer the question of why liberal arts and sciences education is currently (re-)emerging in Europe, we first need to look into the question of why liberal education lost the scope that it continued to have in the USA. As 'Europe' is a complex concept, and in particular when it comes to its higher education histories and models, it seems to be difficult to present a single explanation for the fact that liberal arts did not make it to the mainstream of higher education in Europe. Rather, there is a range of factors that likely influenced the relatively weak role that the model has played during long periods in Europe.

## Explanations for the Sharp Decline of the Liberal Arts Model in Europe

The history of the European university is rich and characterized by distinct periods. Medieval concepts were followed by renaissance humanism and enlightenment with evolving emphases on what knowledge means and how it should be pursued and studied (de Ridder-Symoens, 1996). Major changes, with clear traces remaining in today's higher education institutions, occurred, and particularly so during the 19th century. On the one hand, the importance of liberal education and of teaching as the unique *raison d'être* of a university was defended fiercely by university founders and leaders of the time, notably by Cardinal Newman, who held that academic institutions should focus on training responsible citizens whose intellectual and emotional background would contribute to the smooth evolution of society as a whole and should (thus) *not* engage in research: 'That it is a place of teaching universal knowledge, this implies that its object is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement of it. If its object were scientific and philosophic discovery, I do not see why a university should have students'. Likewise, Mill emphasized the universal nature of learning and wrote on how it should take place within a university: 'It is not a place of professional education. Universities are not intended to teach the knowledge required to fit men for some special mode of gaining their livelihood. Their object is not to make skilful lawyers, or physicians, or engineers, but capable and cultivated human beings'. On the other hand, new models were emerging on the continent. For example, in France there was the establishment of the elite part of French higher education, the *grandes écoles*, by Napoleon, who put great emphasis on their role in training for the professions crucial in serving the state, such as administration, engineering, and the military. Most importantly, the research university was established in Berlin by Wilhelm von Humboldt, who subscribed to the liberal education value of '*Bildung*', but who defined the teaching role of the university solidly in relation to its research mission (Nybom, 2003).

While these new influences helped to shape the European higher education system, with different combinations of professional training and/or research functions being integrated into various types of institutions, this does not in essence distinguish the situation very much from that in the USA, where von Humboldt's concept of the research university was also influential. Many American scholars attended German universities and in the late 19th century, the Ph.D. became established along the lines of the Humboldtian model, which in fact was the model after which the American research university has been shaped. The professions have also gained their place in the American university, although more explicitly at the graduate level (and in professional schools), rather than is the case in European universities, where training for the professions usually begins at the undergraduate level. This is still evident in,



for instance, medical, engineering and law programmes in Europe, which start as specialized tracks upon entrance in the university system. For a long time, the division between undergraduate and graduate cycles was not very explicit or even absent in Europe, which has been (re-)adjusted by the Bologna initiative. This explains why these influences (the utilitarian-professional and the research-dominated model) have led to a greater degree of early specialization here than in the USA. The dominance of professions and disciplines in undergraduate programmes in Europe may not only be held responsible for early or even over-specialization and professional bias, but also for a loss of the particular humanistic educational values such as preparation for citizenship and the universal nature and purpose of learning as such (exceptions in Europe are probably some of the Scottish and Irish colleges in which Newman's and Mill's ideas were more or less sustained). In American curricula, this has, through the traditions of general education and the definition of the academic core as part of the university undergraduate curriculum to some extent, always been preserved. Yet the focus and purpose of general education should be viewed in relation to the nature and length of secondary education in Europe, where part of the general education that is conveyed in American colleges and universities is typically offered in higher level secondary schools. The liberal arts model sustained an even more explicit focus on the important aim to educate the 'whole person' including the moral implications thereof.

Although, the impact of utilitarian and more research-led university models can be observed in both Europe and the USA, this seems to have led to a greater degree of early specialization in European undergraduate education, where this was not or only weakly defined as an educational phase (degree cycle) in its own right. This divergence, however, only developed throughout the 20th century and even more so after the World War II, when higher education entered a new phase during which other major trends emerged. These 20th century trends seem to add substantially to the explanation of why the liberal arts model survived better in the USA than in Europe.

The post-World War II period was characterized by the massification and democratization of higher education, although this emerged later in Europe (the 1970s) than in the USA (the 1950s) because of the recovery from World War II. More importantly, this took place in models that were less differentiated than in the USA, where the growth of the student body was paralleled by the emergence of more differentiated systems, for which the Californian Master plan became a major reference model (Rothblatt, 1992). In large countries such as Germany and France, most of the growth has been accommodated within the research universities (accommodating at present a large majority of the total student population). In smaller countries, such as the Netherlands and Belgium, the growth was mainly accommodated in the non-university or polytechnic

sector (which currently hosts approximately two-thirds of the students). By and large the European systems are of a binary nature, with the undergraduate phase in universities being dominated by the disciplines and non-university undergraduate institutions mainly specializing in professional training.

Massification took place in combination with an increasingly stronger and ultimately almost complete dominance of public government, in most cases by the nation state (with exceptions in federal states such as Germany), in the steering of higher education. Here I subscribe to Rothblatt's main explanation for the fact that 'liberal arts education has been decidedly low on the scale of priorities in Europe', namely that, 'With only few exceptions, governments, ministries, politicians, and bureaucrats establish the parameters of educational discussion in Europe. Until about 1990, the agenda largely followed from the fact that higher education was almost wholly dependent upon public taxation' (2003, 5). He states that although the governmental agenda in the USA has also been concerned with questions of resource allocation and competitiveness, there is at the same time 'a large and important private sector committed to liberal education which guarantees that its interests are widely voiced and represented' (2003, 6).

Private initiative and associated funding to sustain the particular values and the mission of liberal arts education have by and large been missing in Europe. Instead, 'public' is the norm for both the governance and funding of higher education. The limitations of such a budgetary basis, which is almost by definition more restricted than that in countries such as the USA, Canada, Japan, and South Korea, where more substantial private contributions to higher education are common (OECD, 2008a), are recognized by many policy makers. Yet, the virtues of publicly funded higher education are strongly recognized by various stakeholders, notably the students who usually wish to preserve low or no tuition fees and open access without selective admission policies. This idea of 'free access for all' is strongly associated with the value of 'higher education as a public good'. Although there are notable exceptions to this model (like in England, where universities charge tuition fees and apply selective admission, and France in the case of the *Grandes Ecoles*), it is generally perceived as the core of the European egalitarian tradition and strongly defended by students, as expressed, for instance, in the emphasis they put in the Bologna Process on the 'social dimension' of higher education. At the same time, the model has been criticized repeatedly by international organizations for its (inherent) contradictions. The OECD commented that, despite strong social values, as regards access and equity, the EU is performing poorly as compared with the USA. The European Commission (EC) also admitted that, 'While most of Europe sees higher education as a "public good", tertiary enrolments have been stronger and faster in other parts of the world, mainly thanks to much higher private funding' (EC, 2005). The Commission

also criticized the apparent uniformity in provision as being due to a tendency to egalitarianism and a lack of differentiation, as well as to over-regulation and the strong dependence on the state inhibiting reform, modernization, and efficiency (EC, 2005). These observations regarding the lack of differentiation (including the aforementioned relatively early specialization in undergraduate education) and the strong egalitarian tradition framed in a predominantly public (funding) model in Europe largely explain why liberal arts education has not developed in Europe to the extent that it has in the USA. Yet, as the conditions for European higher education are changing, the reappraisal of these factors may as a consequence also reveal why liberal arts is actually (re-)emerging in Europe. Before pursuing the second part of the analysis, a brief mapping of the emergence of liberal arts in Europe is presented.

### **Mapping the (Re-)Emergence of Liberal Arts Education in Europe**

It should be noted that the overview, as presented in Table 1, does not pretend to be a wholly up-to-date and comprehensive summary, since new developments may be underway but not yet announced publicly. The list includes established and formally announced initiatives, with reference to their age, origin, and legal status.

The chronology shows that all early initiatives were American by origin. This is shown by the institution names and by the fact that they are funded, accredited or otherwise governed by American bodies. And by their affiliation to associations as AMICAL, which is an international consortium of American-model, liberal arts institutions of higher learning or the Association of American International Colleges and Universities, although the membership of the latter is wider than liberal arts only. These initiatives usually have a private (not-for-profit) legal status.

More recent initiatives (started around 1990) are more genuinely European. They are typically initiated by a European university and became (later on) affiliated to the consortium of European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences (ECOLAS [www.ecolas.eu](http://www.ecolas.eu)). There is some interesting overlap between these groups, since some of these later initiatives were still established with the help of American institutions or organizations, for example through joint degrees, US accreditation, and/or funding from American foundations. These colleges or programmes have both an American and a European affiliation, such as John Cabot University (established as an American university which recently joined ECOLAS) Jacobs University (co-established by Rice University in the USA), Smolny College in Russia and ECLA in Germany (both associated with Bard College in the USA). At the same time, institutions, which are listed as USA affiliated only (typically no ECOLAS membership), may of course well

**Table 1** Trends in the (re-)emergence of liberal arts education in Europe

<i>Year of establishment</i>	<i>Institution</i>	<i>USA affiliated</i>	<i>Europe affiliated</i>	<i>Private</i>
1886	American College of Thessaloniki	X		X
1923	American College of Greece	X		X
1962	American University of Paris	X		X
1969	American University of Rome	X		X
1969	Franklin College, Switzerland	X		X
1972	Richmond, The American International University in London	X		X
1972	John Cabot University. An American university in Rome	X	X	X
1988	Vesalius College (Vrije Universiteit Brussel) (Belgium)	X		X
1991	American University in Bulgaria	X		X
1991	Central European University	X		X
1992	Collegium Artes Liberales (Interdisciplinary Studies Institute at the University of Warsaw) (Poland)		X	
1998	Gotland University (Visby, Sweden)		X	
1998	University College Utrecht (Utrecht University, the Netherlands)		X	
1999	Smolny College (St. Petersburg) (Joint degree programme of Bard College (USA) and Saint Petersburg State University) (Russia)	X		
1999	European College of Liberal Arts (Berlin)	X	X	X
1999	Jacobs University Bremen (Germany)	X	X	X
2000	Liberal arts degree at St Mary's University College, Belfast (UK)		X	
2002	University College Maastricht (Maastricht University, the Netherlands)		X	
2004	Roosevelt Academy (Utrecht University, the Netherlands)		X	
2004–2006	Liberal arts programmes at the University of Amsterdam, Tilburg University and Utrecht University's main campus (the Netherlands)		X	
2006	BISLA, Bratislava (Slovakia)	X	X	X
2006	Faculty of Liberal Arts, Charles University (Prague, Czech Republic)		X	
2007	Academia Vitae, Deventer (the Netherlands)		X	
2009	Amsterdam University College (joint degree programme of VU University Amsterdam & University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands)		X	
2010	Leiden University College (Leiden University, the Hague Campus, the Netherlands)			
2010	Liberal arts programme at Winchester University (UK)			
2011	Liberal arts programme at University College London (UK)			
2011/12	Liberal arts programme at Freiburg University			

have European partners. It should also be noted that the ECOLAS membership is larger than the institutions listed in Table 1 only. It also includes institutions that are not (yet) recognized as having a liberal arts programme or college, or that may be interested in establishing one in the future (e.g. Bucerius Law School (Hamburg, Germany), Catherine's College of Tallinn University (Estonia), Catholic University Leuven (Campus Kortrijk, Belgium), Ghent University (Belgium), Liverpool Hope University (UK).

Although this article does not aim to make a detailed analysis of the characteristics of the various liberal arts colleges and programmes as presented in the table, some more general observations and comparisons between the USA and Europe can be made (Table 2).

**Table 2** Comparison of similarities and differences between liberal arts programmes in the USA and Europe

<i>Similarities</i>	<i>Differences</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● As is the case in the USA, there is a range of profiles, with a rather frequent focus on the humanities (e.g. ECLA and Warsaw) and the social sciences, but also some with an emphasis on the sciences (Amsterdam University College, Gotland University) or even an exclusive science and engineering profile (Jacobs University)</li> <li>● As is the case in the USA, the majority focuses exclusively on undergraduate education</li> <li>● As is the case in the USA, both the models of a separate, usually residential college (although these are in many cases associated with a larger university) and that of a college or degree programme integrated within a larger university can be found in Europe</li> <li>● As is the case in the USA, liberal arts education in Europe is taught in English</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Unlike in the USA, where a college degree takes 4 years, the European liberal arts degree usually takes 3 years (although the American (accredited) colleges and universities in Europe also offer 4 years bachelor degrees)</li> <li>● Unlike in the USA, liberal arts colleges and programmes in Europe are usually not accredited under a specific framework (although ECOLAS aims to develop this over time) and are not compared with each other in any sort of league table, such as the Liberal Arts Colleges Rankings in the USA (US World and News Report, 2010)</li> <li>● Unlike in the USA, where private liberal arts colleges outnumber public institutions, in Europe (as could be expected on the basis of the contextual analysis above) the majority of European liberal arts colleges are public</li> <li>● Although it is clearly growing, the liberal arts 'sector' is (still) significantly smaller in Europe than in the USA</li> <li>● Uneven geographical spread: the majority of initiatives seem to be concentrated in the north-western part of Europe (notably in the Netherlands and the UK) and in Central and Eastern Europe</li> </ul>



The overview and comparative analysis clearly show that the re-emergence of liberal arts is not only a relatively recent, but especially also (still) a very small-scale feature of European higher education. A comparison of size is not easy to make, since European data frameworks, such as provided for the USA by the Carnegie Classification, are still under development (see <http://www.u-map.eu/>). According to the Carnegie website, there are 287 bachelor colleges providing programmes in the liberal arts and sciences (6.5% of all institutions), enrolling together some 527,533 students (3% of total enrolment), an average enrolment of 1,838 students per institution (data for 2005). In Europe, the definition of liberal arts colleges and programmes is still by and large left to self-characterization and although the current provision will certainly exceed the approximately 30 institutions listed above, the total size of the sector will still be much smaller than in the USA, as the European liberal arts colleges typically enrol < 1,000 students each. Taken as a percentage of the total size of European higher education, which is comparable with that of the USA in terms of total student enrolment, that is 17.5 million vs 17.7 million (OECD data for 2007), it may not even exceed 1%.

### **Explaining the (Re-)Emergence of Liberal Arts Education in Europe**

The main factors explaining why liberal arts education did not evolve into a significant model in Europe have been discussed. As suggested, the explanation behind its more or less recent and small scale (re-)emergence is likely related to the reevaluation of these same factors due to changing conditions in the European higher education landscape. Indeed, as was stated by Rothblatt, 'Revolutionary educational conditions in Europe have diverted some subsidiary attention to liberal education. Many European countries are now experiencing American-style problems in maintaining the type of advanced and specialized undergraduate education once deemed solely appropriate for universities. An increase in the number of students leaving high school with university qualifications and an expansion in the number and types of places offering higher education — an expansion that has accelerated since the end of the Second World War — have forced university leaders and academics, as well as government and civil service planners, to reconsider alternative forms of undergraduate education' (2003, 6). That is, the (re-)emergence of liberal education in Europe is a response to the need to differentiate the massified European systems, which are characterized by insufficient diversity and flexibility in terms of the types of institutions and programmes offered to an increasingly large and diversified body of students (Huisman and Van Vught, 2009). Specifically, this is related to two main dimensions of differentiation.

The first is the quest for broader bachelor programmes in order to overcome the disadvantages of too early and over-specialization at the undergraduate level. This pursuit has been made explicit by leaders and policy makers for more than a decade, for instance in the Dearing Report on 'Higher Education in the Learning Society' (UK, 1997), which pleaded for broad, multi-disciplinary degrees and a stronger focus on skills development for employability. The report is now seen as one of the front-runners in suggesting new avenues for liberal arts programmes that 'might soon become a part of the UK higher education mainstream' (The Guardian, 19 January 2010). The President and Provost of University College London recently endorsed these rationales for establishing liberal arts programmes (to be started in 2011) by stating that he wanted to move away from producing students with a narrow view of the world by ones who are global citizens. This was, in his own words, a response to employers who demand 'students who are literate and numerate and broadly based'. He went so far as to say that, 'We are worried about the traditional model of higher education in the UK, which progressively focuses our students on narrower and narrower areas of study', while at the same time suggesting that, 'It may be particularly attractive to international undergraduate students' (Grant, 2009), which is a market of great importance to UK institutions.

The call for broader bachelor programmes has also been launched repeatedly by the European commission, which has criticized the monodisciplinary and rigid nature of most university programmes in Europe. With a view to enhancing the employability of university graduates, the commission proposes a stronger focus on more generic skills, flexibility, and interdisciplinarity. This message was mostly launched in the context of the Lisbon Strategy, under which the Commission developed its 'Agenda for the Modernization of Universities' (EC, 2005). However, in the parallel Bologna Process, which focused directly on degree structures and the reform of curricula, relatively little attention was paid to these issues (see below).

In the Netherlands, the rationale behind widening the approach to undergraduate education and to re-establishing the balance between breadth and depth of study has also been an important driver for change in this area. This is not only related to the many problems at undergraduate level, which are associated with early specialization (e.g. mistaken choice for study programmes, high dropout rates, deterioration in general academic skills in areas such as writing, speech and analysis, etc.), but also to the deeper need for generic skills, flexibility and interdisciplinarity required for innovation, a key factor for the success of a knowledge economy.

Clearly, this demand for broader bachelor programmes is framed by, on the one hand, the aim of improving learning effectiveness and, on the other hand, a knowledge economy discourse related to innovation and employability. In

particular, the latter refers to the type of utilitarian rationale that belongs to the neo-classical economic paradigm positioning higher education as a producer of human capital for economic growth. The question of how this type of utilitarian rationale relates to the inherent humanistic values of the liberal arts tradition presents itself and will be addressed later in this article.

The second dimension of differentiation is the search for elite education in massified and overly egalitarian and democratic systems. One can speak of an almost total decline of elite or top tier higher education in continental Europe. 'Almost total' as there are certainly exceptions. These would include the aforementioned *Grandes Ecoles* in France and the UK with a selective system of university admission within stratified levels and Oxbridge as global brand name elite institutions (Palfreyman and Tapper, 2009). Other selective branches of higher education include schools of fine and performing arts, hotel schools, business schools, some military academies, etc. A turning point for Germany seems to have been reached recently with the launch of its 'excellence initiative', although this is mostly focusing on research (Kehm and Pasternack, 2009). As the OECD's Secretary General (Gurria, 2007) phrased it: 'Europe has no shortage of brilliant minds, but they are locked away in low-performing institutions'. European university leaders have, in fact, admitted that, 'It is evident that the European university system needs to broaden access on a more equitable basis, that it has to reach out to increased excellence and that it must allow for more diversification within the system. The American university system is "elitist at the top, and democratic at the base"; the European university system seems to be neither' (Winckler, 2006). Furthermore, the EC underlined that one of the main challenges of European higher education is not only to widen access but also to enhance excellence. The messages on excellence and 'top', however, are rather distant from the culture, tradition, and thus expectations in large parts of continental Europe, where widely accessible and free higher education is strongly associated with the value of 'higher education as a public good' (as discussed above; see also van der Wende, 2009). Introducing more elite and thus selective types of higher education will therefore require very deliberate strategies. The example of the Netherlands as a country with strong egalitarian traditions, which yet managed to introduce a range of liberal arts initiatives, demonstrates that change in this respect is feasible. This will be discussed in more detail in the next section of this article.

Two dimensions of the need to differentiate have been analysed: (1) the need to develop broader bachelor programmes with the aim of enhancing learning effectiveness and to generate graduates with the skills relevant for the knowledge economy, and (2) the need to establish more selective branches of higher education focusing explicitly on excellence. As these developments coincided in time largely with the implementation of the Bologna Process,



it is relevant to ask what the role of this Europe-wide initiative has been in relation to the development of liberal arts in Europe.

It seems that Bologna has played an important role, yet mostly as a factor facilitating the development of new types of undergraduate education, such as liberal arts programmes, as an opportunity enabling the (re-)emergence of this type of education in Europe. In previous sections of this article, it was stated that the weak division between undergraduate and graduate education in Europe seems to have reinforced the influence of disciplinary and professional paradigms regarding undergraduate education, leading to a great degree of early specialization. Bologna has adjusted this division by (re-)introducing undergraduate education, that is the bachelor level, as an educational phase in its own right. At the same time, however, we noted that the Bologna Process held very few substantial messages regarding the importance of widening the scope of undergraduate curricula. There was general concern with flexibility of curricula, but this has mostly been worked out around the concepts of modularization and student-centred learning. Themes such as the development of generic skills, deeper understanding of knowledge, critical thinking, and interdisciplinarity were, however, less central in implementation of the process. In a recent evaluation report it was admitted that 'The lack of discussion has probably led to some confusion between the broad, humanistic objectives and the technocratic aspects of some Bologna action lines' (Sursock and Smidt, 2010, 31). Indeed, the liberal arts advocates in Europe are not impressed as yet. They believe that the introduction of the bachelor/master structure across Europe has not led to a significant improvement so far, and that in most countries, the attention seems to have been focused more on improving master's programmes, while the bachelor phase has remained largely undervalued. As they believe that it is during the undergraduate phase that a strong academic basis should be laid, their primary mission remains to promote undergraduate liberal arts and sciences programmes across Europe (<http://www.ecolas.eu>). Also, some American observers are sceptical about the Bologna Process, as for instance Gaston (2008), who stresses that the Bologna Process, despite its great accomplishments, has from the start concentrated more or less exclusively on the economic advantages of tertiary education, with a strong vocational and even utilitarian thrust, whereas the strength of the American liberal arts tradition emphasizes a broader set of competencies, that is growth in 'critical thinking, quantitative literacy, communication skills, ethical reasoning, and civic engagement'. Rothblatt is more optimistic and observes that the transnational dialogue on liberal education has become more meaningful as 'Europeans dissolve parts of a particular type of elite higher education system and acquaint themselves with the challenging traits of a system more highly differentiated as to kinds of institutions, academic expectations, degree and diploma awards,

part-time and continuing education, and types of students' (Rothblatt, 2003, 8). At the same time, however, he notes that the understanding of the term 'liberal arts' differs quite substantially and that the emerging concern for this type of education may in some places be not for liberal education so much as for better student services, which, as he admits, may be an unavoidable outcome in a state of mass enrolment. Indeed, the small scale and intensive teaching model that characterizes liberal arts colleges is most popular with European students who feel lost in the large-scale institutions of mass higher education. Other reasons may be that it allows them to avoid (or delay) making the difficult choice for a disciplinary study programme. Foreign, especially US students may be attracted for yet another reason, that is the relatively low price of liberal arts programmes in Europe. In their turn, policy makers and administrators may convert into proponents of the liberal arts and sciences model supported by research findings, which indicate that the intensive teaching model leads to higher learning effectiveness, however, without necessarily recognizing or adhering to the deeper meaning and values of it.

The main factors behind the emergence of liberal arts education in Europe are related to a need to differentiate massified higher education systems, both in terms of alternative — broader or more interdisciplinary — programme offerings and more selective admission procedures for undergraduate education. The Bologna Process facilitated these developments as it (re-)instituted undergraduate education as an educational phase in its own right. As has been emphasized before, it is impossible to generalize the trends for Europe as a whole. The need for more selective admission may for instance be more strongly felt in certain countries than in others, as will be discussed in more detail in the context of the development of liberal arts in the Netherlands (below). Another particular case is the development of liberal arts in Central and Eastern Europe, where the fall of the Berlin wall (i.e. the disintegration of the Soviet empire) allowed a range of countries to re-integrate into Europe, to break away from imposed educational models and to benefit from economic and educational reforms associated with democratic societies.

### **The Development of Liberal Arts in the Netherlands**

Compared with other European countries, the Netherlands has produced the greatest number of new liberal arts initiatives in one single country (nine out of 19 between 1990 and 2010; see Table 1). Almost half (six) of the Dutch research universities have established a liberal arts college or programme and some even two. This remarkable fact requires further analysis: How and why has the liberal arts model emerged here so successfully? What were the reasons and conditions for this?



The Netherlands has a binary higher education system composed of 14 universities that cater for roughly one-third (231,823 in 2009) of the students and some 40 universities of applied science (*hogescholen*) that accommodate roughly the other two-thirds (403,212 in 2009) of the students. Both types of higher education institutions exist under the same legislation and have a relatively high degree of autonomy, although new programmes can only be established after *ex ante* accreditation by the national accreditation council, tuition fees are determined by the government, and admissions criteria are set by law. The establishment of new institutions is particularly difficult due to the fact that their formal recognition (necessary for governmental funding) requires a change of the Higher Education Act in which they are all listed. Despite these restrictions, it has proven possible to develop a range of liberal arts colleges and programmes across the country.

Although the liberal arts model was considered in the Netherlands in the mid-1980s as part of an intended national higher education reform plan, which was never implemented (see Rupp, 1997), it developed some 10 years later in a bottom-up fashion, that is emerging from initially personal and then institutional initiatives. In the mid-1990s, a former dean of Utrecht University initiated the establishment of University College Utrecht, which opened in 1998. It started as a small scale, residential college in the vicinity of Utrecht University's main campus. It quickly attracted a great deal of attention in the higher education community and gained a strong reputation. As a result of a lack of adequate frameworks, for instance for accreditation as a liberal arts programme, it initially drew on provisional arrangements in order to regularize its functioning as an independent programme, which was by and large inspired by an American liberal arts curriculum. The fact that it provided evidence for enhanced learning outcomes and higher learning effectiveness in combination with strong features of internationalization stimulated other institutions to follow the new model. Maastricht University opened its college in 2002 and Utrecht University opened a second college in Middelburg (the Roosevelt Academy) in 2004. In addition, programmes labelled as liberal arts were opened on Utrecht's main campus, in the University of Amsterdam and in Tilburg University in the same period. These can be considered as broader or less straightforward interpretations of the liberal arts college model, are not all taught in English, and are not necessarily residential. Another major initiative emerged in 2009, when the University of Amsterdam and the VU University Amsterdam jointly established Amsterdam University College (AUC). Finally, Leiden University opened its university college in September 2010. At present, at least three more liberal arts initiatives are being planned by other Dutch universities.

These liberal arts colleges and programmes were all initiated by established and reputable Dutch research universities and obtained national

accreditation and public funding. The only private project, that is the Academia Vitae in Deventer, which was established without any institutional affiliation to an existing university, did not. This proved to substantially hinder its functioning and it was forced to declare bankruptcy in early 2010.

Although the new initiatives required substantial advocacy and energy to be accepted, the impression is such that the overall higher education framework in the Netherlands provides sufficient scope for this type of innovation, which did not only entail a more open and flexible curriculum model, but also alternative, that is more selective, approaches to admission, a collegiate (usually residential) campus model, and a strong internationalization component. In fact, the new model was gradually embraced by new policy frameworks, such as designed by an advisory committee on opportunity for talent. This ‘Commissie Ruim Baan voor Talent, 2007’) advised the government on creating opportunities for talented students (2007), which resulted among other things in national experiments with selective admission that enabled the university colleges to implement those. And consequently by the Sirius Programme for excellence in higher education, which subsidized from 2008 on some 50 million Euros for initiatives to develop excellence, from which the various university colleges benefitted to a great extent, as well regular programmes for instance for the development of honours tracks. The Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) developed an agenda to increase the study success of bachelor students, that is to reduce dropout rates and increase on-time completion of the bachelor degree (<http://www.vsnunl/Focus-areas/Key-objectives/Study-success.htm>), which was by and large inspired by the success demonstrated by the university colleges. This illustrates that not only the founding universities but also the university sector at large expect the university colleges, with their liberal arts models, to be lighthouses of good practice which should, through dissemination of best practices, become beneficial to the mainstream of undergraduate programmes. In other words, the university colleges are accepted as a new branch of excellence in Dutch university education. One could say that they became gradually ‘embedded’ by the various policy frameworks. Ultimately also the regulatory framework was adapted. First with the development of a tailored accreditation framework for liberal arts programmes and second by a proposed change in the Higher Education Act which will grant university colleges an exceptional status by allowing them structurally to select their students and to set differential tuition fees. This proposal is currently (after the elections of June 2010) pending upon approval from Parliament.

This particular bottom-up course of institution-driven innovation, paralleled in the first instance by ‘soft’ (i.e. advisory committees and temporary subsidies)



policy measures at national level and weak governmental involvement, leading ultimately to structural change in the higher education system and regulation, is typical for the Netherlands. This was asserted in Witte's (2006) study on the implementation of the Bologna Process in the country.

The main reasons for the emergence and steady acceptance of liberal arts in the Netherlands are largely identical to those presented above for Europe in general. It was felt that there was insufficient differentiation in the massified and strongly egalitarian system. This was underlined by the OECD, which stated that Dutch higher education demonstrates an insufficient level of differentiation, excellence is underrepresented, the international dimension should be enhanced, and too-early specialization should be avoided (OECD, 2008b). The liberal arts model, with a broader curriculum approach and small-scale collegiate setting, seemed to provide an effective response to the inefficiencies of the undergraduate phase. This was in 2010 confirmed by an international committee (the 'Veerman Committee') established by the Dutch minister of Education, Culture and Sciences that advised on how to further differentiate Dutch higher education. Also in this report, the university colleges were set as an example of good practice (Commissie Toekomstbestendig Hoger Onderwijs Stelsel, 2010). Selective admission and higher learning standards responded to the complaint expressed by not only academics but also one-third of the students: Regular programmes are not sufficiently challenging. In the Netherlands, the Bologna Process was a facilitating factor, although the first initiatives preceded and inspired its implementation and the internationalization ambition was more comprehensive. University colleges in the Netherlands have very high (30–60%) proportions of international students and genuinely internationalized curricula. Furthermore, they provide a response to the increasing internationalization trends in Dutch secondary education, with substantial growth in bilingual education (English — Dutch) and in International and European Baccalaureates. This growing demand has been analysed as a type of social mobility of 'new global elites' (Weenink, 2007, 2008).

The foundation of AUC confirmed the significance of the new liberal arts model in Dutch higher education, as it was established jointly by the capital city's two major research universities and with substantial up-front support from the Ministry of Education, the City of Amsterdam, and corporate sponsors. They established AUC based on the belief that the leaders of the future will have to be successful in working together across the boundaries of nationalities, cultures and disciplines, that they will have to perform on an international competitive level in scientific, corporate and public service sectors. Furthermore, it was felt that the global city of Amsterdam, with its two major research universities, was the perfect context where excellence and diversity could naturally meet. The underlying considerations reflect



the factors (described above) that led to the development of liberal arts in the Dutch university sector:

- The globalization of our society and the need, in a globally competitive environment, to nurture talent, develop it and attract it internationally.
- The need to widen choice in Dutch higher education and to create more avenues for excellence.
- The increasing demand for study programmes that are intellectually challenging and call for broad academic, cultural and social interests.
- The need for more opportunities for students to major in science and science-related fields in a liberal arts and sciences context.
- Developments in bilingual and international education at Dutch secondary schools.
- The multicultural character of Amsterdam and the presence of so many international companies and institutions, offering the perfect environment for connecting excellence and diversity in an academic context (AUC Faculty Handbook).

AUC capitalized on the previous initiatives, mainly introduced by the Universities of Utrecht and Maastricht. It also capitalized on the American experience, but not without a critical stance. In considering its profile, it drew on recent accounts of liberal arts education in the United States including strong pleas to reinvent liberal education in the view of especially new pedagogies (Levine, 2006) and sharp critiques of how even great universities such as Harvard failed to fulfil their basic mission in undergraduate education, that is to educate students to become responsible citizens (Lewis, 2006) and, in particular, on the serious reflections on undergraduate education in the USA, as expressed by Bok (2006), who admitted that basic levels in academic skills such as mathematics, writing, speaking, and critical thinking were not achieved by the majority of students. Furthermore, it was acknowledge that global knowledge, such as foreign languages, international understanding and intercultural awareness was virtually lacking in most programmes, including those run by top-level institutions. The critical AAC&U (2007) report on *College Learning in the Global Century*, which presented an interesting review of liberal arts education underlining the importance of a global perspective by stating that recent world events have brought into the foreground the importance of linking academic education to issues of democratic citizenship, pluralism, and interculturalism, was also considered. An earlier (2005) AAC&U report on essential learning outcomes in liberal arts demonstrated that intercultural knowledge received low ratings from both faculty and students. Low scores on learning outcomes from liberal arts programmes in quantitative literacy were also quite striking.



AUC benefited from these lessons learned and demonstrates that European initiatives are not necessarily a simple copy of American liberal arts models. Its motto, 'Excellence and Diversity in a Global City' reflects the belief that both excellence and diversity matter, as both competition and cooperation are key to success in a globalized world. Leadership does not only require excellence, but also the understanding and valuing of diversity (AUC, 2009). Diversity is reflected in its student and staff body. Global issues, multilingualism and intercultural skills are integral to the curriculum. Another profiling choice was made to emphasize the sciences (AUC aims for 50% science majors) and the training of quantitative skills (numeracy) for all students. This was, on the one hand, a strategic choice since the country and especially the city produced insufficient numbers of science graduates and it was clear that potential science candidates were attracted more by broader programmes than by the traditional monodisciplinary science studies. On the other hand, it was based on the belief that the sciences need to be an integral part of an all-round education and that they can be successfully taught in a liberal arts context (see, for instance, the evidence provided in favour of teaching the sciences in a liberal arts context by Nobel Laureate T. Cech, 1999). Moreover, that the bridging of the sciences and the humanities and social sciences is essential to solving the world's greatest problems, as expressed by the president of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences and Arts in his address at AUC's opening, referring to C.P. Snow's famous lecture on 'The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution' (1961): 'We are increasingly dependent on and driven by science and technology, the silent forces of history, and ignorance of the working and ideas of science is dangerous'. These considerations inspired the development of a new curriculum, drawing on imminent scholars in all disciplines from the two founding universities. The bare question of what should be taught in order to equip graduates for success in the 21st century led them to outline an engaging curriculum that reaches across disciplinary boundaries, focusing on the 'the big questions in science and society' ([www.auc.nl/acadprog](http://www.auc.nl/acadprog)).

## Conclusions and Reflection

Recent European developments urged higher education systems to adapt in order to better prepare college graduates for the complex realities of this new global world, in which Europe wants to play a role as a leading knowledge economy. However, the realization of the Humboldtian tradition, with its blessed link between research and education and its strong emphasis on the disciplines, had led to overly narrow areas of study. The Bologna Process, underlining the importance of undergraduate education as an educational cycle

in its own right, has not yet achieved its potential for broadening undergraduate education. European higher education needs to differentiate more in order to generate excellence and, as such, has pushed the search for new avenues and solutions. Also, in the USA, it was realized that the traditional modular and disciplinary curriculum had become dysfunctional, as it results in a fragmented and incoherent educational experience, whereas the frontiers of knowledge call for cross-disciplinary enquiry, analysis, and application and the major issues and problems of our time — from ensuring global sustainability to negotiating international markets to expanding human freedom — transcend individual disciplines (AAC&U, 2007). In both Europe and in the USA, the requirements resulting from globalization and the innovative character of the knowledge economy are leading to a revival and revaluing of the liberal arts and sciences tradition. The question was raised before, however, how the utilitarian rationales of the knowledge economy are to be related to the inherent humanistic values of the liberal arts tradition. The (provisional) answer is that they need to be combined, as the 21st century requires graduates to be broadly educated, global citizens, both literate and numerate. Thus, they should ideally pursue an educational approach that bridges the humanities and the sciences, as defended by Snow (1961). The liberal arts and sciences model is qualified to pave the way and the fact that it is developing in Europe creates promising opportunities for cross-Atlantic learning, inspiration, and cooperation. At the same time, it should be noted that this development in Europe is only nascent and far from having the scope, size, and elite status that it has in the USA. Despite its European origins and re-emerging popularity, substantial advocacy is required by and within the European higher education community in order to deepen the understanding of the liberal arts model of education in order to truly benefit from its potential for the 21st century.

## Note

1 This article is based on a key note address delivered at the International Symposium 'Liberal Arts Education: Global Perspectives & Developments', co-organized by the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, USA and Amsterdam University College, the Netherlands, on 14 April, 2010 in Boston, MA.

## References

- Amsterdam University College. (2009) 'Impressions of the grand opening', <http://www.auc.nl/aucnews/home.cfm/933925A3-1321-B0BE-A45F0D08931C38D7>.
- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2005) *Liberal Education Outcomes. A Preliminary Report on Student Achievement in College*, Washington, DC: AAC&U.



- Association of American Colleges and Universities. (2007) *College Learning for the New Global Century. A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America's Promise (LEAP)*, Washington, DC: AAC&U.
- Bok, D. (2006) *Our Underachieving Colleges. A Candid Look at How Much Students Learn and Why They Should be Learning More*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Cech, T.R. (1999) 'Science at liberal arts colleges: A better education?' *Daedalus* 128(1): 195–216.
- Commissie Ruim Baan voor Talent. (2007) 'Wegen voor Talent', [http://www.leroweb.nl/docs/lero/wegen\\_voor\\_talent.pdf](http://www.leroweb.nl/docs/lero/wegen_voor_talent.pdf).
- Commissie Toekomstbestendig Hoger Onderwijs Stelsel. (2010) *Differentiëren in drievoud. Omwille van kwaliteit en verscheidenheid in het hoger onderwijs*, Den Haag, the Netherlands: OCW.
- Dearing, R. (1997) *Higher Education in the Learning Society*. Leeds, UK: National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education.
- De Ridder-Symoens, H. (ed.) (1996) *A History of the University in Europe*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- European Commission (EC). (2005) 'Mobilising the brainpower of Europe: Enabling universities to make their full contribution to the Lisbon strategy', [http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/comuniv2005\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/doc/comuniv2005_en.pdf).
- Gaston, P.L. (2008) *Bologna: A Challenge for Liberal Education and an Exceptional Opportunity*, Washington, DC: AAC&U.
- Glyer, D. and Weeks, D.L. (eds.) (1998) *The Liberal Arts in Higher Education. Challenging Assumptions Exploring Possibilities*, Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Grant, M. (2009) 'US-style liberal arts degree at UCL', *Financial Times*, 30 October.
- Gurria, A. (2007) 'Human capital: Europe's next frontier', Schuman Lecture 2007, for the Lisbon Council, Brussels, 27 February.
- Huisman, J. and Van Vught, F.A. (2009) 'Diversity in European Higher Education: Historical Trends and Current Policies', in F.A. van Vught (ed.) *Mapping the Higher Education Landscape. Towards a European Classification of Higher Education*, Dordrecht, Germany: Springer, pp. 17–39.
- Kehm, B. and Pasternack, P. (2009) 'The German "Excellence Initiative" and its Role in Restructuring the National Higher Education Landscape', in D. Palfreyman and T. Tapper (eds.) *Structuring Mass Higher Education. The Role of Elite Institutions*, London: Routledge, pp. 113–128.
- Levine, D.N. (2006) *Powers of the Mind. The Reinvention of Liberal Learning in America*, Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lewis, H.R. (2006) *Excellence Without a Soul. Does Liberal Education have a Future?* New York: PublicAffairs.
- Nussbaum, M. (1997) *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nybom, T. (2003) 'The Humboldt legacy: Reflections on the past, present and future of the European university', *Higher Education Policy* 16(2): 141–160.
- OECD. (2008a) *Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society*, Vol. 1, Paris: OECD.
- OECD. (2008b) *Reviews of Tertiary Education — The Netherlands*, Paris: OECD.
- Palfreyman, D. and Tapper, T. (2009) 'Oxbridge: Sustaining the International Reputation', in D. Palfreyman and T. Tapper (eds.) *Structuring Mass Higher Education. The Role of Elite Institutions*, London: Routledge, pp. 303–320.
- Rothblatt, S. (ed.) (1992) *The OECD, the Master Plan and the California Dream: A Berkeley Conversation*, Berkeley, CA: Center for Studies in Higher Education University of California.
- Rothblatt, S. (2003) *The Living Arts: Comparative and Historical Reflections on Liberal Education*, Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.

- Rupp, J.C.C. (1997) *Van oude en nieuwe universiteiten. De verdringing van Duitse door Amerikaanse invloeden op de wetenschapsbeoefening en het hoger onderwijs in Nederland 1045–1995*, Den Haag, the Netherlands: SDU Uitgevers.
- Snow, C.P. (1961) *The Two Cultures and the Scientific Revolution. The Rede Lecture 1959*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Sursock, A. and Smidt, H. (2010) *Trends 2010: A Decade of Change in European Higher Education*, Brussels, Belgium: EUA.
- The Guardian. (2010) *Liberal arts offer something completely different*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/jan/19/liberal-arts-degrees>.
- US World & News Report. (2010) 'National liberal arts rankings', <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/liberal-arts>.
- van der Wende, M.C. (2009) 'European Responses to Global Competitiveness in Higher Education', in J. Douglass, J. King and I. Feller (eds.) *Globalization's Muse: Universities and Higher Education Systems in a Changing World*, Berkeley, CA: Berkeley Public Policy Press, pp. 317–341.
- Weenink, D. (2007) 'Cosmopolitan and established resources of power in the education arena', *International Sociology* 22: 492–516.
- Weenink, D. (2008) 'Cosmopolitanism as a form of capital: Parents preparing their children for a globalizing world', *Sociology* 42(6): 1089–1106.
- Winckler, G. (2006) 'The contribution of universities to Europe's competitiveness', speech given to the Conference of the European Ministers of Education; 16–17 March 2006; Vienna, [http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/EUA\\_Winckler\\_Speech\\_160306.1142503291615.pdf](http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/EUA_Winckler_Speech_160306.1142503291615.pdf).
- Witte, J. (2006) 'Change of degrees and degrees of change', *Comparing Adaptations of European Higher Education Systems in the Context of the Bologna Process*, Ph.D. dissertation, Enschede: Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies, University of Twente.