

Interdisciplinarity in a Liberal Arts Context: the Reform of the Bachelor Degree in Europe after the Pandemic

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An Outline:

- I. Common problems and challenges: Massification-Specialization-Ranking.
 - II. What unites and what divides the ID and LAS?
 - III. Three models of LAS in Europe and Hans Adriaansens' revolutionary model transforming large universities into colleges.
 - IV. ECOLAS Manifesto: about the crisis of BA in Europe
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I) Common problems and challenges of Interdisciplinarity (ID) and Liberal Arts and Sciences (LAS)

I will start with a pessimistic outlook for ID and LAS:

Why? By being optimistic, I would be preaching to the choir here. What we need is resilience and fortitude when facing the European University structure.

Whatever we do, there is a limit what we can achieve when facing the Ivory Tower, which is a mono-discipline fortress. There is little we can do about this and we should recognize our limits to achieve a major change. *Small work* will do! (*Small work* was a credo of Tomáš Garigue Masaryk –a politician, philosophy professor, the person who urged student of mathematics, Edmund Husserl, to study Philosophy, and, finally, in 1918, in his 70s, the man who became the first President of Czechoslovakia.) So SMALL WORK can achieve great things!

3 obstacles to ID and LAS: MASSIFICATION – SPECIALIZATION -- RANKING

1) The Massification of Education

Not only we can do little about this, in fact, we do not wish to stop it. It is a great achievement of the post-war Western liberal democracies. This phenomenon has made university the most ubiquitous institution around the world.

However, LAS in particular suffers as a result of MASSIFICATION. **Why?** Because if we were to convince politician and administrators that all undergraduate studies should become LAS, the costs would skyrocket. Besides, the greatest resistance we would face would not be from politicians, or even administrators, but from the faculty. (*I will get back to this point when discussing the revolutionary model of Hans Adriaansens.*)

ID studies are less affected by MASS education. Still, imagine that all students in HUM, SOCSCI and NATSCI would engage in ID studies. A daunting prospect even without Jerry Jacobs' attacks against the field. (Perhaps you will convince me that I am wrong, and that perhaps ID **can** become a universal model!) That brings me to the 2nd obstacle:

2) Specialization

The Humboldtian Research part of *Bildung* is the only part that is left. Originally, it was a noble pursuit that included a moral dimension and the search for self-knowledge. As Hans Adriaansens observes:

“Paradoxically, this focus on research that evolved at German universities that claim Bildung as their foundation but prioritize only the research component rather than acquiring self-knowledge was devised by Humboldt, who stressed both. He also believed “that teachers and learners are jointly doing research and that it is this form of jointly acquiring knowledge that defines university education””.
(Adriaansens, 2017)

[Oh well, good old *Bildung* is gone. And when we think of narrow specialization that we cannot reform and expand, we think, with some *Schadenfreude*, of another German term: *Fachidioten* as a result of narrow discipline education from BA to PhD.]

Let's use a more sophisticated analysis for single-discipline study. It prevails because it competes in the free academic market place. Competition among scholars is intense and the fields are getting more and more narrow. One should add, it is useful to societies, armies and democracies, that all benefit from applying the fruits of this competition within narrow disciplines.

Thus, specialization is ubiquitous and unstoppable. However, ID studies and LA can provide an alternative education and research method at least for some students who will eventually become researchers. We might – at best -- slow down the impact of mono-disciplinary education. *Small work*—modest results...

3) **Ranking – ‘The Holy Grail’ of higher education**

International Ranking Indexes of Universities is the 3rd obstacle to ID and LAS – Again, more for LAS, less for the ID studies. First let me outline how damaging is the scheme of ranking to the implementation of LAS for undergraduate education – the source of the crisis in bachelor's education in Europe, as will be analysed later.

The response of all prestigious universities to the problem of short-term legitimacy, or utility and limited resources, is to focus primarily on research, publications, and grants. The reason is that these are the factors that provide precious points in the Shanghai Ranking Index, the ‘Holy Grail’ of all big research universities focused on rankings. Under such conditions, prominent scientists, and postgraduates as well as doctoral students, naturally get priority. By contrast, undergraduates are often viewed as a necessary burden, their teaching a tedious repetition of basic material that is far from the cutting-edge knowledge discussed at prestigious conferences and published in research journals. This attitude intrudes even into academic language, where scholars talk about ‘research opportunities’ and ‘teaching loads’ (Boyer, 1996, p. 151).

Besides, the Shanghai Ranking Index cares little about what and how undergraduates learn. This is not because it is unimportant, but because it is very difficult to measure and monitor. Thus, there is little incentive to focus on undergraduates because almost none of the grants or research projects obtained by universities depend on the quality of teaching or the well-being of their undergraduates.

Hence, Ranking cares little about TEACHING; cares little about students (except with some platitudes about “how important students’ education is.”)

Rankings care more about ID studies, but not that much more.

The reason why ID does not receive attention from Ranking agencies is rather objective – the benefits of ID studies are difficult to measure – at least immediately. And hence academic ranking does not prioritize ID as such. (Again, I would be glad to discuss this.)

II.) What do ID and LAS share, and what divides them?

- Both are not ENDS but rather methods of research or approaches to education.
- Both aim to re-orient the system; both wish to make holes in the silos of *single discipline studies* but, let’s remember, the holes for each are in somewhat different places:

LAS – the focus is strictly on undergraduate education. (There is some overlap with the ID: student-based learning, acquiring soft skills, undergraduate research.)

ID focus more on MA, PhD, postdocs. Why? The main object and vehicle of interdisciplinarity is **research**. And it is most active among graduates, postgraduates and their professors.

It is in the nature of RESEARCH that ID wishes to excel and make it relevant and more flexible in an ever faster-changing world.

Students are, of course, important – but not part of the struggle, so to speak. Students share the benefits, the fruits of ID, but do not fight for the SD model.

Perhaps the division and commonality of ID and LAS is best explained if we outline what defines LAS and ask how ID relates to it:

LAS is not a franchise model with the same product in different environments. Its programs are very diverse. Still, the focus of LAS can be delineated in 3 areas:

LAS's AIMS: CHOICES – SKILLS – VALUES

Let's elaborate these 3 briefly and let's see how ID relates to them.

a) Choices:

one of the most detrimental aspects of European Bachelor Programs is that the vast majority of students must choose one discipline from over 1000 programs. An 18-year-old can hardly be expected to know what path he or she chooses until retirement. (There are a few exceptions – 10 per cent maximum is my anecdotal experience while talking to high school students for the past 20 years.)

LAS believes that student should choose gradually. They start with general subjects and then narrow down their options, before choosing a Major. Continental Europe has predominantly a 3-year BA programme, hence there is little time to ponder the choices. Our students have to declare the major after their 3rd semester. Still, this is far better than forcing high-school students to choose their specialization before they enter the university.

The LAS model believes that it is in MA and PhD study that focus on a narrow subject and specialization should occur in graduate studies. Students knows where their strengths and preferences are and are ready to specialize. (However, MA and PhD study is outside the perimeter of LAS.)

And it is there where ID differs substantially. First, Bachelor programmes should offer ID courses and even programs, but this is

not essential for LAS. (We might differ, but a bachelor's students must learn the basics, and there is more and more basics to master; only then can they start mixing, combining, to be interdisciplinary. However, there are several LAS problem-based programs around Europe, as well as in the USA that are purely ID.)

Hence, the gradual refining of CHOICES [from basics to ID], crucial for LAS is, I gather, not so vital for ID.

b) Skills

Every research university insists that their undergraduate students acquire, besides the knowledge of a discipline, soft, intellectual skills. However, the data tell a different story. How can these skills be acquired in a lecture-exam model where hundreds of students listen to a lecture the whole semester. Even if it be brilliant lectures, what follows are multiple choice exams and often, but not always, an essay at the end of semester. It is passive learning, with no space for enhancing one's skills.

Indeed, it is in the seminar setting of each LAS course that writing and reading improves because it is done on a weekly basis. Student should receive feedback within 5 days of handing in an essay. They engage in discussion with fellow students and with a teacher who, in Leo Strauss words, just an 'older student'.

Again, for the ID improving skills is important but not essential. Of course, the skills are a precondition for doing ID research, projects and workshops. The acquisition of skills is indirect, a by-product of ID cooperation – and probably an excellent way to gain them.

c) The Moral Dimension of Education

It is a contentious proposition that education can ensure a sound moral outlook and furnish students with civic values. Yet almost all the LA Colleges in the USA, and many in Europe, in their mission statements assert that they do so. We know there is no guarantee of educating students in morality. Let me read the master on this subject, John

Cardinal Newman, in his magisterial *The Scope and Nature of University Education*:

Knowledge is one thing, virtue another; good sense is not conscience, refinement is not humility...Philosophy, however enlightened, however profound, gives no command over the passions, no influential motives, no vivifying principles. Liberal education makes not the Christian, not the Catholic, but the gentlemen. It is well to be a gentleman, it is well to have a cultivated intellect, a delicate taste, a candid, equitable, dispassionate mind, a noble and courteous bearing in the conduct of life – these are the connatural qualities of a large knowledge... still, I repeat, they are no guarantee for sanctity or even for conscientiousness, they may attach to the man of the world, to the profligate, to the heartless... (p. 99).

Yet, we at LAS try, we believe, we hope that our students become better citizens! Certainly, there is no chance of moral refinement if relevant texts are barred from the classroom.

That is the reason why LA often, but not always, requires reading of Great Books, has philosophy or ethics as compulsory courses, and offers a variety of literature and art courses. It is the study of religion, philosophy and literature that forces one to confront one's own ethical outlook, stereotypes, and review, if he or she hold strong, even fanatical, beliefs.

And data show that young, intelligent, educated individuals are prone to hoaxes and extremism; in Central Europe, neo-fascists are often those with university educations.

I have noticed several remarks that 'values' are the part of ID, but it is not entirely clear whether this is essential for ID. That is not a criticism, it is simply an aspect of a fight that the ID community is engaged in. And instilling values, *per se*, is not, it seems to me, the main focus.

III. 3 Models of LAS in Europe & the Oxbridge-Dutch Mix of Hans Adriaansens

There are three types of Liberal Arts schools and programs in Europe (I will just list them rather than debate in details):

- a) Independent, private Liberal Arts Colleges (Rare)
- b) University College (The Netherlands, The UK, Poland, Germany, Bulgaria)
- c) LAS Integrated into larger university (Germany – Leuphana)

These models are not spreading in Europe, except in the UK and NL and even there they seem to reach a plateau. The major universities do not wish to alter their lecture-exam mass model of undergraduate education. They consider the costs efficiency more important than what and how Bachelor students study and learn. Besides, the quality of undergraduate studies does not influence the ranking positions of universities. Thus, the EU -- like the international ranking institutions with their method of evaluation – also seems oblivious to Liberal Arts model. The EU's attitude is determined by the stress on graduate and postgraduate education, research and publications – all quantitative evaluation determining the position of universities in international ranking schemes. Hence, the EU underestimates the role importance of and the uniqueness of teaching methods required by undergraduate education.

I will focus on a model that is just an idea. Indeed, a revolutionary idea outlined by the doyen and founder of LAS in the Netherlands, Professor Hans Adriaansens.

The scheme is radical yet relatively simple: first, to transform entire universities into university colleges and, then, at the college level, students obtain an intensive and versatile Liberal Arts education. The most radical step would be to remove bachelor's studies from the narrow discipline of departments and, instead, place undergraduate students into different university colleges.

Division into a collegiate structure would actually imitate the old Oxbridge model of colleges still existing at the two great English universities, and at many large universities in the USA and Canada. Students entering a college within a large university would first study, and make choices and changes without committing themselves to a single departmental program. Students at the same college would eventually disperse into a variety of subject areas, yet they would share a common core and a variety of different courses, as well as a common social experience.

The new model would certainly anger the narrow-discipline departments because they would see it as undermining their long-established privileged position. The university college transformation, one should stress, would not abolish departments themselves, for they would remain available to master's and PhD students while also serving the colleges with a variety of courses. What would change is the end of the departmental monopoly over bachelor's degrees, as is universal throughout Europe today.

There are Challenges to Adriaansens' Model.

The major hurdle to overcome, one that deserves some attention, is the question of costs. On the surface a collegiate setting, small classes, a tutorial system and a large numbers of contact hours would demand much greater costs in comparison to massive classes and the lecture-exams model where hundreds of students are free to attend lectures during the semester and then pass the final exam or submit one long paper. However, Adriaansens argues that costs might not be higher; they might even decrease. He calculates that, for example, the University of Utrecht, with 18,000 undergraduate students, could be divided into 30 colleges with 600 students each. And the costs should not be higher than the same number of students currently divided into

44 separate departments with multiple academic and non-academic staff (p. 30).

Needless to say, it would provoke resistance from several quarters, especially the academic community, which is by nature conservative. Thus, such a large-scale reform of the whole university model could only be the result of a broad, Europe-wide discussion and political action on the scale of a New Bologna Declaration. However, now one does not witness any sense of crisis with the Bachelor degree in Europe. Neither politicians, not educators and, strangely enough, not even students seem to be alarmed. Students are often frustrated by mono-disciplinary studies but they are far from protesting at the academic barricades. Thus, a wholesale implementation of liberal arts for the whole university is not likely in Europe any time soon. Yet, Adriaansens believes that if universities wish to survive in the future as viable institutions, they should reform.

IV. The ECOLAS *Manifesto* the Crisis of BA in Europe

Alarmed by the further decline in the quality of education during the pandemic, in 2021 ECOLAS issued a Manifesto calling on educators and politicians in Europe to change their attitude towards the bachelor's degree. The immediate impulse was the experience of online education during the pandemic. It demonstrated that a semester-long online lecture model, generally practiced at undergraduate level, is inadequate for, and quite detrimental to, students' learning. Passive listening to even excellent online lectures without interaction, discussion and personal communication diminishes students' attention span and the ability to critically assess the learning material. Above all, online education does not teach the important soft or intellectual skills that are so crucial for further study or employment. The dire experience of online education during the

pandemic should serve as a wake-up call for educators and administrators of undergraduate programs, and should prompt reform of bachelor's degrees around Europe. The post-pandemic experience could lead to two outcomes: while it could offer an opportunity to change the shape of bachelor studies, it could also lead to ongoing deterioration, and expansion of online education, and thereby to a further decline in quality. The ECOLAS Manifesto asks:

“does our current undergraduate education or Bachelor's Degree respond adequately to the contemporary needs of societies threatened by economic, environmental, and political challenges? Does it provide the skills and personal traits that will strengthen democratic values in the EU?

The answer to such questions must be an emphatic “No”. In order to realize fully their capabilities, instead of mass-scale and narrow subject studies, today's Bachelor students require student-centered learning, engagement with multiple disciplines and hands-on research experience. Only in this way are they able to acquire the breadth of knowledge and the depth of learning that leads to moral, non-extremist viewpoints as well as the kind of creative problem-solving that our institutions increasingly seek and that the well-being of democracies demand.”

The traditional bachelor's degree at most European universities limits students' choices and prevents or restricts ID studies. The pandemic has demonstrated the disadvantages of online education and many students have lost almost two years of education during the pandemic. As a result, what is at stake is their mental, social, and cognitive experiences during the most important three years of their lives. Derek Bok quotes L. Auchincloss, who described these four years of everyone's life with some poignancy: “Never again does one receive impressions with quite the same kind of emotional intensity that one does between the age of seventeen and twenty-one. It is so brief a time, so very brief, yet one can build a lifetime on the exploitation of it” (Bok, 1986, p.38). Educators owe it to students to ensure that they can make the most of this opportunity.

To conclude, Europe, indeed the world, stands at a crossroads following the pandemic. Challenges like political polarization, economic crisis, climate change and inequality have become even more significant. In the long term, education will play the key role in tackling and hopefully remedying these problems. To that end, educators must ask, how does education prepare the younger generation for a rapidly changing world? No less important, what remains in the modern university to inculcate students with the ethical values and moral outlook that were integral to the original *Artes Liberales* project as well as to the German tradition of *Bildung*? For now, the answer remains: not enough. If students lack moral fortitude, our future politicians, scientists, scholars, and artists are likely to pursue their own self-interest and security rather than the common good. To protect the future of our environment and our democracies, a more enlightened model of higher education is an objective to which we should all be committed.