

Adapting Liberal Education for an AEC and Global Era: A call for an ASEAN Liberal Educational College

การปรับใช้การศึกษาแนวเสรี

ภายใต้ยุคประชากมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนและโลกวิถี:

การเรียกร้องการศึกษา

แนวเรียนในอาเซียน

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บทคัดย่อ

บริบทของบทความวิจัยชิ้นนี้คือการสถาปนาประชากมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียน (2558) ความเป็นพหุวัฒนธรรมและเศรษฐกิจโลกวิถี 4.0 ทั้งนี้ โลกวิถีนี้ถูกนิยามว่าหมายถึงสภาวะโลกไร้พรมแดนในทุก ๆ ด้าน ปัญหาการวิจัยหลักคือต้องการหาคำตอบเกี่ยวกับการศึกษาแนวเสรีแล้วนำมาเป็นฐานคิดสำหรับพัฒนาและพัฒนา อีกครั้งเพื่อช่วยให้การศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาสามารถตอบสนองแรงขับเคลื่อนให้ได้ นอกจากนี้ บทความนี้ยังได้ถกเถียงเกี่ยวกับวิถีของการของการศึกษาแนวเสรี โดยอิงกรอบทฤษฎีรูปแบบทุนของบูร์ดี้เยอ การส่งสัญญาณของสเปนซ์และแนวคิดความสามารถของมนุษย์ของเชน

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ระเบียบวิธีวิจัยหลัก คือ การศึกษาแบบกรณีศึกษาเปรียบเทียบ จากมหาวิทยาลัยสี่แห่ง ได้แก่ มหาวิทยาลัยวิศวกรรมศาสตร์ มหาวิทยาลัยศรีนครินทรวิโรฒ มหาวิทยาลัยเชียงใหม่ และมหาวิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีราชมงคลธัญบุรี ประเทศอินเดีย มหาวิทยาลัยเซ็นทรัลเอเชีย และมหาวิทยาลัยเยล-อีนยูเอส ประเทศสิงคโปร์ งานวิจัยนี้ได้มีการเสนอรูปแบบของการศึกษาแนวเสรีที่เกี่ยวข้องและเข้มงวดมากขึ้น และเหมาะสมกับยุคประชาคมเศรษฐกิจอาเซียนและยุคโลกาภิวัตน์ที่มีการศึกษาที่เข้มแข็งประกอบไปด้วยสื่อองค์ประกอบหลัก ได้แก่ ทักษะการคิดวิเคราะห์ การสื่อสารทางอารมณ์ และสมรรถนะระหว่างวัฒนธรรม ซึ่งสององค์ประกอบหลังถูกเพิ่มเข้ามาเพื่อให้การศึกษาแนวเสรีที่มีความเกี่ยวข้องกับยุคสมัยและเข้มงวดมากยิ่งขึ้น

หัวใจของการศึกษาแนวเสรีคือการพัฒนาทักษะการคิดวิเคราะห์ การเขียน การอ่าน และการเรียนรู้เพื่อที่จะเรียนรู้ นอกจากนี้ นักศึกษายังถูกกระตุ้นให้พิจารณา ประเด็นสำคัญหลัก ๆ เช่น ความหมายของชีวิตและเส้นทางชีวิตและเส้นทางสู่ ความสุขและสุขภาวะ จากการนิสิตทั้งสี่จึงนำมาสู่การเสนอโมเดลสถาบันการศึกษา แนวเสรีสำหรับอาเซียนใหม่ขึ้นมา โดยนักศึกษาที่ได้รับการศึกษาแนวเสรีจะมีความพร้อมเป็นพิเศษในการทำงานในยุคเศรษฐกิจใหม่ โดยนักศึกษาเหล่านี้จะมีคุณลักษณะที่เรียกว่า “protean mental ability” (สตรอส, 2560 : 122) ซึ่งจะเอื้อให้นักศึกษา พัฒนาปัญญา ความสามารถรอบด้าน และปรับตัวอย่างรอบด้าน รวมทั้งมีศักยภาพที่ยิ่งใหญ่สำหรับการเรียนรู้ตลอดชีวิตอย่างต่อเนื่อง

คำสำคัญ: การศึกษาแนวเสรี คิดใหม่กับการศึกษาแนวเสรี สถาบันการศึกษาอาเซียน ใหม่ กรณีศึกษาเปรียบเทียบ

Abstract

The context for this research paper is the establishment of the ASEAN Economic Community (2015) and an increasingly multicultural and globalized 4.0 type economy. Globalization is defined as accelerating interconnectivity in all realms. It has its dark (virus pandemic of 2020)

and bright sides. Thus, the key research problem addressed in this paper is how can liberal education be revived and rethought to help higher education respond to these many highly disruptive forces. There is then a discussion of the evolution of liberal education. Multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks guide this study including Bourdieu's forms of capital, Spence's signaling theory, and Sen's capabilities approach. The major methodology for the study is comparative case studies. There are four case studies analyzed in this study, namely Visva-Bharati and Krea Universities in India, University of Central Asia, and Yale-NUS College in Singapore. Based on our findings, we propose an even more relevant and robust form of liberal education suitable for the AEC and rapidly globalizing era. There are four key elements of a rigorous robust liberal education, namely, critical thinking skills, communicative skills, soft skills, and intercultural competence. The last two elements have been added to the traditional model to make liberal education even more relevant and robust. The heart of a liberal education is, thus, to develop critical thinking, writing, speaking, and learning to learn skills. Also students are challenged to think about the big issues such as the meaning of life and paths of life and the road to happiness and well-being. Also informed by these four case studies, a model for a new ASEAN Liberal Education College is proposed. Students receiving a rigorous liberal education are particularly well prepared for the new economy (Roth, 2017). They have what Stross calls "protean mental ability" (Stross, 2017: 122). This provides them impressive intellectual versatility and adaptability and great potential for continual life-long learning.

Keywords: Liberal education, Rethinking liberal education, ASEAN

Liberal Education College, Comparative case studies

Yes, you may well doubt, you may well be uncertain... Do not accept anything because it is the authoritative tradition, because it is often said, because of rumor or hearsay, because it is found in the scriptures, because it agrees with a theory of which one is already convinced, because of the reputation of an individual, or because a teacher said it is thus and thus... But experience it for yourself.

The Lord Buddha, the Kalama Sutra

Context and research problem

At the end of 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) became operational to promote and facilitate trade and movement of labor and capital among the 10 Southeast Asian nations comprising the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established in 1965 during the Cold War (Fry, 2008). International regimes like the AEC reflect the growing influence of globalization. For purposes of this study we define globalization as accelerating interconnectivity in all realms. It is a phenomenon which has its bright and dark sides. The devastating spread of the corona virus with its horrific consequences reflects this dark face of globalization. Another dramatic mixed outcome of globalization is a huge and growing refugee community. Currently there are 25.9 million refugees and 3.5 million asylum-seekers globally (UNHCR, 2020). There are also huge numbers of guest workers across the globe. Many Thais go to work in places like Korea, Brunei, and Saudi Arabia (Keyes, 2014). Thus, workplaces are becoming increasingly multicultural. The new 4.0 economy and rapid technological change are additional manifestations of the powerful force of globalization. The bright side of globalization is reflected in the writings of Thomas Friedman who emphasizes how interconnectivity can enhance creative cooperation for the common

good and peaceful relations among countries and peoples (Friedman, 2005, 2016). Also global cooperation on a massive scale is needed to fight global warming and eliminate violent conflicts.

All these forces are potentially disruptive of higher education which in general has failed to change adequately to respond to these challenges. These disruptive forces can be both positive and negative. Much of higher education today is no different than it was decades ago and Arum et al. (2016) in their critique of higher education find that US college students, even at top institutions, are learning little and often failing to develop critical thinking skills. Thus, the key research problem addressed in this paper, is how can liberal education be revived and rethought to help higher education respond to these many highly disruptive forces.

The evolution of liberal education

Liberal education has deep historical roots going back about 2,500 years ago to both ancient Greece and ancient India and China. With the development of a new form of democratic government in Athens in around 500 B.C. a new kind of education was needed. Liberal education was the response, but there were two competing schools. One school led by Plato and his followers such as Aristotle and Socrates was philosophical and emphasized the search for truth through dialectic reason. This was the true science that a free person needed (Burke, 1980). It anticipated modern scientific thinking. The opposing school was less philosophical and more practical emphasizing rhetoric and oratory. This second school was led by Pericles and it also emphasized the tolerance of diversity of people and lifestyles. Later Cicero in Italy emphasized the integration of the two approaches, arguing that rhetoric should be based on knowledge.

The roots of liberal education can also be found in the East in the thinking of both the Lord Buddha and Confucius, two great teachers.

Our paper begins with a quote defining Buddhist epistemology which emphasizes both critical thinking and experiential learning, key elements of the way we are redefining liberal education in this paper. Though not well known, Confucius was a strong advocate of holistic education and interdisciplinary thinking (Tu, 1996).

Centuries later higher education evolved in Europe with again primarily two alternative approaches. One was centered in Germany led by Wilhelm von Humboldt emphasizing the development of the research university (Östling, 2018). In England there was an emphasis on residential liberal arts colleges.

Then the U.S. as it developed its higher education system, drew upon both these European traditions. Leading universities in the U.S. such as Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and Stanford emphasize liberal education at the undergraduate level and research at the graduate level.

In recent years with the accelerating cost escalation of higher education and rapid technological change there has been a growing emphasis on skill-oriented education and STEM studies, creating the so-called liberal arts crisis (Coté, J. E., and Allahar, 2007, 2011). There has been a serious erosion in the appreciation of the core values of a liberal education. And there are those who argue that the humanities are “useless”.

The heart of a liberal education is to develop critical thinking, writing, speaking, and learning to learn skills (Zakaria, 2015). Also students are challenged to think about the big issues such as the meaning of life and paths of life (Morris, 1973) and the road to happiness and well-being.

Research Objectives

This is an R and D type study. Based on our research (meta-synthesis of literature on liberal education and its evolution) and our four informative case studies, we propose a new model of liberal education appropriate for the AEC and highly multicultural globalizing era.

Definitions

It is imperative to define carefully terms used in this paper. Globalization was defined above. Other key terms used in this paper are defined as follows:

Internationalization: a process to enable institutions and individuals to respond to the challenges of globalization by strengthening their related capacities and developing mechanisms to enable them to operate effectively and successfully in an increasingly multicultural world.

Liberal arts education: a learning system emphasizing the study of primarily the humanities, but also the social sciences.

Liberal education: a learning system which includes the study of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Genuine liberal education includes the important development of scientific literacy in response to C. P. Snow's (1993) concerns about the studies of the arts and sciences not being integrated.

Education means training which enables individuals to become capable in various areas such as reading critically and writing well. This definition draws on the root Sanskrit meaning of the Thai word for education, *kansueksa*, which means to become capable (Sirindhorn, 2018) (see Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2011).

Soft skills: capabilities such as teamwork, leadership, and cultural empathy (Taylor, 2020).

Value premises and positionality

All four authors strongly believe in the value and worth of liberal education but that it needs to be adapted in Southeast Asia for the rapidly globalizing and AEC era. In fact, we believe it is even more germane now than ever. And we believe strongly that the model developed has implications far beyond the Southeast Asian world. And

the new model proposed for an ASEAN Liberal Education College has implications for rethinking liberal education globally.

Theoretical/conceptual frameworks

To guide this study, we draw upon multiple theoretical and conceptual frameworks. A first basic conceptual framework is that of “Forms of Capital” developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986). His four forms of capital are human, social, cultural, and economic. A key question then is to what extent does a rigorous quality liberal education program enhance these important forms of capital? For example, social capital is developed through social networking enhanced by studying in multicultural environments involving much cooperative learning. Cultural capital relates to “soft skills” that have often been ignored by institutions focusing on the “vocationization of higher education” and narrow skill development related to labor markets that are both hard to predict and highly volatile.

Another important framework is signaling theory developed by the British economist and Nobel laureate Michael Spence (1974). The key question then is what does having had a rigorous liberal education signal to potential employers about an individual’s talent and capabilities? Liberal education graduates are, for example, much more likely to earn doctorates and become academics. This signaling concept is particularly important since it is often hard to measure directly many attributes associated with a robust liberal education such as communicative and other “soft” skills.

Our third framework, developed by the Indian Nobel laureate Amartya Sen (a graduate of Visva-Bharati University) is the “capabilities approach” which relates directly to the definition of education we are using in this study (Sen, 1999, 2000). So here the key question is: through a rigorous liberal education, what specific capabilities do individuals

develop? Sen's approach which also emphasizes freedom to make life choices differs significantly from the traditional emphasis on knowledge acquisition, which currently becomes often quickly out-of-date in an age of information explosion (Did You Know, 2020).

Two other frameworks also inform this study, namely, the concept of experiential learning developed by John Dewey and the progressive philosophy of the Brazilian educational thinker, Paulo Freire. Dewey's approach is well reflected in this famous quotation by Confucius:

I hear and I forget.

I see and I remember.

I do and I understand.

One of the co-authors of this paper has used this philosophy to guide his study abroad programs to Southeast Asia over the past 20 years and it has worked extremely well (Tomita, et al., 2000). For example, students are empowered by learning to write in the Thai script, becoming “literate”. Learning other languages is an integral part of a genuine multifaceted liberal education. For Westerners to become exposed to Asian languages and different ways of writing and thinking are extremely valuable. Though few are aware of this, Dewey actually went to China and promoted his experiential philosophy of learning (Wang, 2007). The second line of the quote above reflects the importance of the visual arts, which is integral to liberal education. Two key features of Freire's approach are empowerment and *conscientização*, critical consciousness (Freire, 1973). With respect to the latter, students need to become more conscious of the importance of deeply understanding key global issues such as climate change and inequality, and then to commit to working for the common good (Crosby and Bryson, 2005; UNESCO, 2015; Tian and Liu, 2018).

Methodology and methods

Bartlett and Vavrus (2017, 2018) are highly critical of conventional case study research methodologies which fail to reflect divergent epistemologies. They offer the comparative case study approach as a promising alternative which we adopt here. We analyze four diverse cases from Central, South, and Southeast Asia. Thus, our methodology is also multiple case studies (Yin and Campbell, 2018). Our diverse research methods used in doing the case studies are the following:

- 1) A meta-synthesis of the literature on liberal education and its evolution
- 2) Several in-depth interviews
- 3) Participant-observation

In terms of participant-observation, one of the authors had approximately 30 years both experiencing as a student and then as an academic scholar and leader actively promoting liberal education.

Results

Four Asian case studies are now presented. Two are from India in South Asia, one from Central Asia, and the last one from Southeast Asia.

Visva-Bharati, India: A case study

The Indian Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was widely regarded as a litterateur, poet, and Eastern mystic, but his lesser-known identity is that of visionary educator and creative educational leader (Samuel, 2010). He bequeathed to the world of liberal education Visva-Bharati, a manifestation of his vision to use education as a catalyst to unite the world “irrespective of diversity of language, identity, race, nationality, or religion” (Mukherjee et al., 2016, p. 51).

Visva-Bharati is a visionary educational institution that focuses on holistic, indigeneity-respecting global learning. A pioneer in the liberal

education realm, Tagore was a “change agent across borders in a complicated, equivocal, and multicultural environment” (Pierce, et. al, cited in Park et. al, 2018, p. 96).

In his 1919 volume *The Centre of Indian Culture*, Tagore posited that:

education should be in full touch with our complete life, economical, intellectual, aesthetic, social and spiritual... true education is to realize at every step how our training and knowledge have organic connection with our surroundings (p. 2).

He was deeply dissatisfied with the conventional education system at the time, shackled by its rigidity, lack of imagination, and rote learning methods. This less-than-favorable experience led to his tri-fold vision for education - first, education rests where there is a natural predisposition for the growth of scholarly learning; second, the university exists to produce and disseminate scholarship; third, to enable this, it is necessary to gather intellectuals and scholars who are devoted to creativity, research, and discovery in their fields (Dasgupta, 2010).

Tagore believed in the spirit of universal humanism, and the integration of body, mind, and spirit (Mukherjee et. al, 2016). He placed immense importance on the deceleration of learning, in contravention of the progression-oriented motivations of education systems. Tagore set up Visva-Bharati as an alternative to the colonial, English language-dominant system of education in British India (Dasgupta, 2010).

The roots of Visva-Bharati can be traced back to 1901, when Tagore set up an experimental school with five children, including his eldest son, and an equal number of teachers. This school grew to become Visva-Bharati University in 1921. The name Visva-Bharati means “communion of the world with India,” (Mukherjee et al., 2016, p. 6),

concurrent with Tagore's vision for education as a window to the world. In 1951, Visva-Bharati was recognized as a central university and an *Institution of National Importance* (Visva-Bharati, 2020).

Tagore realized his vision of “education for fullness, harmony, and international understanding” through Visva-Bharati. He sought to establish an international university which encouraged the confluence of “scientists and artists, students and professors, scholars and saints” from all over the world” (Samuel, 2010). He planned to enshrine the idea of a liberal arts education at the university level, establishing education as “aspiring to a nuanced interdisciplinary type of global citizenship and understanding” (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 84).

Being faithful to liberal arts education traditions, Tagore envisioned Visva-Bharati as interweaving communion with nature, intercultural understanding, and sustainable development. The motto of the institution reflects this confluence - *Yatravisvambhavatyekanidam* (where the world becomes a single nest) (Mukherjee et al., 2016, p. 7). In allegiance to this vision, close to a 100 years later, classes are held under trees, and importance is placed on music, arts, and active engagement with nature (Kupfer, 2015).

Tagore's overarching vision centered around a concentric educational vision. Jalan (1976, cited in Samuel, 2010), posits that the innermost circle of the concentric vision focuses on India, with programs to strengthen Indian education. The second circle focuses on Asian Studies, and the third circle explores international understanding and world issues. In concert, the curriculum meets individual, social, and universal needs (Samuel, 2010).

Renowned economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, a former student at Visva-Bharati, was educated in history from all parts of the world, rather than just India or Imperial Britain. The school also had the first Institute of Chinese Studies in the country, and trained students in

arts, crafts, and music from other countries, including Indonesia. Pedagogical models trained students in “world readiness.” They undertook rural reconstruction projects and quasi-ethnographic studies, both to internalize the world within themselves, and find their place in the world (Kupfer, 2015).

While conceptualizing Visva-Bharati, Tagore was insistent that a national university shouldn’t fall prey to religious divisiveness, or represent only the majority religion, Hinduism (Tagore, 1919). Despite this noble vision and Visva-Bharati being a pillar of liberal education, cracks seem to be appearing in its current facade. It seems that the campus is becoming increasingly politically polarized and in recent years is no longer realizing the vision of Tagore. It has become yet another degree mill, one that eschews Socratic learning and exploration through the arts in favor of rote learning and performance on standardized national examinations.

Visva-Bharati typifies the decline of a storied liberal arts institution, one that has let neoliberal market demands guide its journey from uniqueness to mediocrity (see Phan, 2017). Despite Visva-Bharati’s decline, there is a burgeoning of liberal arts institutions in India, as illustrated by the case study of Krea University below. There were fewer than 20 such institutions in the country in 2005; the number rose to more than a 100 in 2013 (Shiv Nadar University, cited in Brara, 2013; Srinivasari, 2019). This signals the relevance of a liberal arts education to the development of capabilities that students need to develop to face the challenges of the 21st century world.

Krea University, India: A case study

Sadly, the regular arts and science colleges mushrooming all over India to absorb the majority of the second and third tier of qualifiers have identified themselves as a greedy racket churning out incompetent graduates. This has motivated senior educators and philanthropic sponsors to

upgrade this model by calling it liberal arts and about a dozen Indian colleges have sprung up over the past four years, offering ‘international’ standards of education. Krea University is one of the significant leaders in this Indian endeavor with a resolve to redefine the liberal arts label in a rigorous, innovative way (Krea University, 2020).

An important part of Krea’s vision is to make research a priority and to combine it with students focusing on multiple environmental concerns, not just the usual areas of forestry and pollution, but also newer challenges such as behavioral economics, migrant labor, climate change, and the traditional arts and crafts. Emphasis is placed on learning to learn, personalization of pedagogical systems, and designing knowledge structures collaboratively. As an example, the University is located close to the salt flats of Pulicat Lake (on the border of the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu), a four hundred square kilometer patch of amazing natural diversity, a long history of trading and populated with an amazing array of Hindu, Muslim, and Christian seafarers and traders. Students and faculty interact with their neighbors in a proactive manner, not only to collect valuable data but also find joint solutions to remedy the various antagonistic forces that afflict the poor living in such coastal zones. At the faculty recruitment level, the university has assembled a quite young and highly qualified team with doctorates from across the world and with a strong commitment to interact with millennial at the eye-level. Almost all its students come from a rather rigid schooling system where rote memorization is given priority over comprehension so as to standardize assessment modes. Yet, these millennials have gone through sufficient amounts of immersion in a parallel social media where they do listen to alternate ways of deconstructing the world around them. In short, they are products of a highly complex counter cultural paradigm, capable of accommodating various registers but not resilient enough to

make their own judgments. So Krea has initiated what could be a unique pedagogical solution.

It is called the School of Interwoven Arts and Sciences (SIAS), which emphasizes interwoven learning defined as follows:

Interwoven Learning is a new paradigm ideal for the connected world. This weaves together the arts and sciences, creativity and action, eastern and western perspectives. It draws upon the profound learnings of the past and present, to ready students for the future (Krea University, 2020).

For a start, students join to embark on a journey of discovery rather than finding the route to a pre-selected destination. Majors and minors will only be mere milestones indicating intersections of knowledge acquisition processes. And in the methods of selecting faculty who shall drive this ambitious undertaking, care has been taken to select a wide range, from artists, renowned pianists, classical dance exponents, to mathematicians. And then there are two centers to inspire students' imagination and artistic spirits. One is the Center for Creative Writing and the other is a Media Lab. Both these centers work towards helping bridge the various subject domains by creating holistic perspectives to weave the variety of distinct information systems together, through appropriate words and images.

The primary role of the Lab is to provide the technical tools and aesthetic modes to visualize images, design sound, and transcreate new ideas. Students and faculty have access to state-of-the-art cameras, lighting gear, sound recording equipment, and editing suites with the capacity to work with 3D graphics. There are materials for the classroom, outreach promotions, and documentation of lectures by leading academicians and entrepreneurs who visit the campus. But the area in which the university excels in the world of immersive and interactive pedagogy is through the

creative use of virtual and augmented reality productions. The only way to navigate the complex minds of the millennial generation is to take academics to their doorstep. The digital domain that they deal with constantly via smart phones, social media, and the wide range of applications has already positioned them well to take up this way of learning. By leaving the tools of perusing the infinite world of information in their hands, the Krea classroom now becomes the space for robust enquiries, debates, and critical thinking to formulate the real knowledge which is going to help them become competent entrepreneurs or valuable employees in whichever sphere they choose. The only way forward is by getting ready to face and handle the unpredictable future.

The University of Central Asia (UCA)

It is certainly difficult to establish a brand new and modern higher education institution that would meet expectations of the students, and at the same time, meet the needs of a diverse mountainous remote region. Making this task even more challenging is the massification and the proliferation of higher education institutions in Central Asia after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. Just in the Kyrgyz Republic alone, since 1991, there has been a nearly seven-fold increase in the number of higher education institutions. With such rapid massification, there have been deep concerns about the quality of higher education in the region (ADB, 2015).

The University of Central Asia was founded in 2000 as a private, not-for-profit, secular university through an International Treaty signed by the Presidents of the three founding states and His Highness the Aga Khan. The treaty was ratified by the respective parliaments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and registered with the United Nations. At the

Naryn Campus Inauguration Ceremony on October 19th of 2016, His Highness Aga Khan, highlighted that the treaty was a unique example to the entire world of how these three countries could join hands together across national boundaries and actually dream together about their common future.

The mission of the university is to promote the social and economic development of Central Asia, particularly its mountainous societies, by offering an internationally recognized standard of higher education and helping the different peoples of the region to preserve and draw upon their rich cultural traditions and heritages as assets for the future. Therefore, all three campuses in each of the countries are located away from the major cities in small mountainous towns.

The School of Arts and Sciences of UCA offers undergraduate programs in computer science, communication and media at the Naryn campus in the Kyrgyz Republic, and economics, earth, and environmental science at the Khorog campus in Tajikistan, and plans to offer in 2022 undergraduate programs in business administration, and engineering sciences at the Tekeli campus in Kazakhstan. Thus, there is a good blend of liberal education and professional studies.

As a next step, UCA developed partnerships with colleges and universities that have strong undergraduate liberal arts programs offered at UCA and signed agreements with the following institutions:

- Seneca College, Canada: Preparatory Program
- University of Technology Sydney, Australia: Communications and Media
- University of Toronto, Canada: Computer Science
- University of British Columbia, Canada: Earth and Environmental

Sciences

- Stockholm School of Economics/Riga, Latvia: Economics
- National Research University's Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia: Economics
- University of Victoria, Canada: Cooperative Education Program
- University of Alberta, Canada: Central Asian Faculty Development Program
- University of Cambridge, United Kingdom: Central Asian Faculty Development Program

All above mentioned undergraduate programs at UCA were developed together with the partner institutions and then shared with the local business and industry experts who provided their thoughtful and valuable input. Thus, we were able to develop strong academic programs that meet national and regional needs of the people who live in the Central Asia region.

In 2016 UCA opened its first campus for students in Naryn, Kyrgyzstan, and a year later, in 2017 the second campus was opened in Khorog, Tajikistan. UCA plans to open the third campus in Tekeli, Kazakhstan in 2022.

The students come mainly from the founding states, and also from the marginalized regions of northern Afghanistan and Pakistan. There are also students from urban areas. Admission is based purely on merit and UCA offers financial assistance, especially to students from rural mountain communities, to cover living expenses at its residential campuses. Unlike most other universities in the Central Asia region where students have to arrange for their own housing and meals, the university provides a unique residential experience for their undergraduate

students, central to quality liberal education and lateral learning. Its modern on-campus facilities include attractive accommodations, meals, a laptop, health insurance, and other facilities. The university provides financial aid to every student who earns high scores on the university admission tests. No qualified student was denied admission because of the family financial situations.

The Aga Khan Humanities Project is another valuable activity of UCA that provides civic education courses and has attracted support from over 70 colleges and universities throughout Central Asia. The Institute of Public Policy and Administration and Mountain Societies Research Institute are two research institutions of UCA and these institutions established strong relationships with the international partners and gained a good reputation and recognition in the Central Asia region and beyond. The Cultural Humanities and Cultural Heritage Unit of UCA was created to preserve the rich and diverse cultural heritage of the region through research, documenting, archiving and supporting the work of scholars from Central Asian nations.

With students coming from the five Central Asia nations and also several South Asian countries, and its active partnerships with nine universities across the globe, this institution has the international/intercultural character central to our new conception of liberal education. In terms of its engagement mission, we close this case with the following quotation:

What this University is all about is not only the power of education, but also the power of international cooperation. It is a power that can change peoples' lives.

His Highness Aga Khan's speech at the Inauguration Ceremony on October 19, 2016

Case study of Yale-NUS College in Singapore

As in the case of Krea University and UCA, Yale-NUS College was a completely new college established in Singapore. Singapore was once a turbulent society mired in political and economic problems, but under the brilliant leadership of Lee Kuan Yew achieved spectacular economic and educational success eventually emerging as the economic and financial powerhouse of Southeast Asia.

At the higher education level Singapore's success was largely in the area of technical/skills education as reflected by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the Singapore Management University (SMU). What Singapore was lacking was a robust rigorous liberal arts college like Oxford or Yale. Thus, the National Singapore University (SNU) invited Yale University (famous for its liberal arts tradition) (Kronman, 2019), to undertake a joint venture to establish a liberal arts college which was named Yale-NUS College, which opened its doors to its first class in 2014.

This college is highlighted in an influential book promoting liberal education (Zakaria, 2015: 67-71). Zakaria states that “this is the most interesting and ambitious effort to reform liberal education for the twenty-first century” (p. 67). In the classic liberal arts tradition, this is a small residential college of approximately 2,000 students. All students must live on campus for all four years, maximizing opportunities for lateral learning. About 60% of the students are from Singapore with most of the rest coming from China, India, and the U.S., with a sprinkling of students from Africa, Europe, and Latin America. Most of the faculty are from NUS or Yale, but there are also outstanding faculty from other institutions such as Smith College. The curriculum includes the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. The humanities curriculum emphasizes comparative

thinking and learning from the great minds of both the Eastern and Western worlds.

Though internships are not required, students are encouraged to use their summers creatively and to engage in co-curricular learning. A student we interviewed spent one summer studying bioethics at Yale, another summer interning with an important NGO in the San Francisco Bay Area, and one summer in Swaziland studying global health issues (Yang, 2020). Students are also encouraged to be engaged in activism related to major social and policy issues. All students are required to write a senior thesis, reflecting the college's emphasis on making "articulate communication central to its intellectual experience" (Zakaria, 2015: 75).

Despite the college's impressive reformed liberal education program, it has been controversial. Skeptics argue that genuine liberal education is not viable in an "authoritarian society" that limits freedom of expression (see Nidhi, 2009). While this indeed may limit the scope of some seminars and conferences, in general it has not been a serious problem for either faculty or students.

Since only two classes of students have graduated, it is too early to do rigorous tracer studies of the success of its graduates. Interestingly, Singapore was the first country to employ tracer studies to assess educational outcomes in a more rigorous long-term way (Pang, 1976; Pang and Chia, 1974). Long-term, it will be important to do rigorous tracer studies to examine what has happened to the graduates of Yale-NUS College as an important test of its genuine quality.

Discussion

Our meta-synthesis of key literature on liberal education confirms that a rigorous liberal education is far from "useless" as its critics allege, but instead the kind of education most appropriate in these turbulent disruptive times (Anders, 2017; Kronman, 2007, 2019; Stross, 2017; Zakaria,

2015). In a major survey of employers, 77% indicated that a liberal education was that most appropriate for the era of the 4.0 economy emphasizing an ability to analyze information and data. A highly specialized skills-based undergraduate education prepares one well for the first job, but liberal education prepares students for *any job*. And Anders (2017) presents data showing that long-term, even in narrow economic terms, liberal education graduates are the most successful. He also mentions how liberal arts majors end up ruling the world, running foundations, and hosting television shows. There are prominent Asian examples that support Anders' claim. For example, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan, the late former Secretary-General of ASEAN, studied political science at the liberal arts college, Claremont. And Abhisit Vejjajiva, former prime minister of Thailand did an interdisciplinary liberal arts degree in philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford. Earlier there was mention of the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, who studied at Visva-Bharati. Finally, with regard to "ruling the world" there is the example of Kofi Annan, Nobel laureate and for 10 years Secretary-General of the UN, who did a liberal arts degree in economics at Macalester College in Minnesota in the U.S.

Comparisons of the four cases, similarities and differences

These four diverse cases share much in common. Key similarities are the following: In all four institutions, there is a strong emphasis on the importance of cultivating interdisciplinary learning/thinking and going beyond narrow "academic silos" that characterize much of higher education (see Klein, 2015; Kline, 1995; Stehrand Weingart, 2018). In terms of epistemology and philosophy, all four institutions emphasize drawing on both Western and non-Western thinkers and approaches. Epistemologies of the South are recognized and included (Santos, 2016). Another commonality among the four institutions is the emphasis on comparative thinking emphasized by the late Czech-US scholar, Josef

Mestenhauser (2011). This is particularly prominent at UCA, where there are students from each of the five Central Asian nations. Also at all the institutions there is an emphasis on social community engagement through activities such as internships or applied research (Walker, 2016). Krea in Sanskrit actually means action-oriented. Related to this theme is promoting sustainable development and developing a commitment to treasuring and preserving the environment. Reflecting Bourdieu's conceptual framework, students at all four institutions have excellent opportunities to build social capital through intercultural networking. This is particularly true at Yale-NUS and UCA. Finally and most importantly, at all these institutions the ideal is for students to become critical thinkers who learn how to learn and become deeply committed to life-long learning, though currently this may not be so true anymore of Visva-Bharati.

In terms of differences, these are all new universities, except for Visva-Bharati which has a long history founded almost exactly a century ago, 1921. Also Yale-NUS and UCA, unlike the two Indian institutions, have access to substantial external funding (Yale University Endowment, Singapore as one of the world's richest nations, and the Aga Khan Foundation). Also in terms of geography only UCA is in a land-locked area emphasizing a mountainous environment and it is the only institution serving primarily Islamic students.

Links between conceptual frameworks and philosophy and pedagogy of liberal education

The model of liberal education presented here reflects the influence of the five conceptual frameworks presented earlier. Students experiencing this kind of genuine liberal education enhance their human, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). And their prior economic capital influences their opportunities to experience high quality liberal education. Reflecting Spence's signaling theory, this kind of education is a proxy suggesting high levels of communicative competence, creativity,

critical thinking, and commitment to life-long learning, skills that can't be done by robots (ISRANEWS AGENCY, 2018). These in turn, are important capabilities, useful for a lifetime, preparing individuals not for a specific job, but any job (Sen, 1999, 2000). Integral to this model of liberal education is active experiential education (Dewey) through social engagement (internships and applied research, for example). Finally, there is an emphasis on the development of consciousness (Freire, 1973) related to key global issues such as climate change, political/cultural conflicts, social injustices, and ultra nationalism, nativism.

Proposal for a new model of liberal education

Based on this research conducted for this study we would like to propose an even more relevant and robust form of liberal education suitable for the AEC and rapidly globalizing era. There are four key elements of a rigorous robust liberal education, namely, critical thinking skills, communicative skills, soft skills, and intercultural competence. The last two elements have been added to the traditional model to make liberal education even more relevant and robust.

Call for a new ASEAN Liberal Education College

To conclude this paper we would like to propose the creation of a new ASEAN Liberal Education College (Chao, 2014; Fry, 2014; Nair, 2016). This would be the “Harvard” of Southeast Asia but be even better by adding the soft skills and intercultural competence components that are missing in many of the world’s leading liberal arts programs.

Students would come from the 10 ASEAN countries and Timor L'este (which will eventually become part of ASEAN). The faculty would be largely from Southeast Asia but outstanding faculty from East and South Asia, Europe, North and South America, and Africa would also be included to expose students to diverse global perspectives. Like the

innovative African Leadership University, there would be an emphasis on leadership and the development of related “soft skills”. As the corona virus crisis has so dramatically demonstrated, all responsible citizens need to be digital capable. Also courses of the new college would use the Web as a tool to bring into classrooms virtually leading intellectuals and thinkers from the ASEAN region.

A major issue in higher education across the globe is inequitable access (Dilaka, 2018). To address this issue, this new ASEAN College would be tuition free (like Rice University in the past) and each student would receive a scholarship to support living expenses. Also to enhance its inclusiveness, the College would also offer alternative degree and non-degree programs in-person and on-line to diverse groups of individuals (such as the elderly, those with disabilities, and those from marginalized ethnic communities). Given rapidly aging populations in countries such as Singapore and Thailand, the elderly are an increasingly important often ignored group (Rung, 2018). Thus, this new institution, unlike many famous institutions of liberal education, would offer much more equitable access to diverse students and would be much more inclusive.

All students would be required to study an ASEAN language of their choice and then do an internship (of three months to one year) in the country of their chosen language. Alan Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, has emphasized the value of such internships (2016). Several liberal arts institutions in the U.S. have developed quality programs of this type such as Stanford’s Volunteers in Asia (VIA), Princeton in Asia, and Yale in China. The intercultural internship program of the ASEAN College could provide a model for the later development of an ASEAN Cooperation Corps which was the vision of the dynamic late Secretary-General of ASEAN, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan.

Skeptics may question whether there is adequate funding to support the establishment of such an institution. If Central Asia, a much

poorer region than Southeast Asia can have a University of Central Asia, then why can't Southeast Asia have a similar regional institution serving students from the entire region? An existing attractive campus facility could be utilized. With funding from each of the region's ten countries (including wealthy Singapore and Brunei) plus philanthropy from Thailand's royal family and other donors and international agencies, finance need not be an issue. The highly successful Asian Institute of Technology (AIT) provides an appropriate model for funding (AIT, 2018).

Final thoughts and reflections

Students receiving a rigorous liberal education are particularly well prepared for the new economy (Roth, 2017). They have what Stross calls “protean mental ability” (Stross, 2017, p. 122). This provides them impressive intellectual versatility and adaptability and great potential for learning specific skills on the job as needed. And related to their long-term success and well-being, they learn how to learn and develop a passion for continual life-long learning.

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