Special Section: Reinventing Liberal Arts

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I am delighted to present to the readers and supporters of *Reinvention* the first special section written by undergraduate Liberal Arts students. This section features articles written by current and former Liberal Arts students, predominantly from UK universities. Its aim is to showcase the depth and breadth of Liberal Arts undergraduate research.

Liberal Arts has a long and consequential history, but in its modern formation it is a relative newcomer to the UK Higher Education scene. Over the past 15 years or so, nearly 40 named Liberal Arts courses have been developed for undergraduate students at UK universities, taking initial inspiration from the long-established US model but *reinventing* it for the UK. While Liberal Arts programmes across the UK are varied, they share some key features. The first is the foundational ethos of interdisciplinarity. On a Liberal Arts course, students study multiple subjects across three- or four-year degree programmes and develop their own individual pathways according to their interests. Some programmes offer a 'major' option, where students get one disciplinary specialism alongside the breadth of different modules drawn from a range of subjects; others allow greater freedom to choose any module that piques a student's interest. Some programmes combine Liberal Arts with natural sciences; some focus on languages; some on social and political engagement; others on fine art and arts practices.

Throughout this interdisciplinary variation, Liberal Arts programmes in the UK emphasise how important it is to reject the limitations of rigid disciplinary boundaries, encouraging experimentation and the questioning of received wisdom. Many have, at their hearts, an experiential learning approach – where students learn by engaging with, and reflecting on, 'real-world' tasks. This might include working with non-academic partners to deliver impactful social projects, as well as reflecting on the skills that students are developing in order to fulfil their ambitions. To offer just one example that

I know well, the Liberal Arts programme at Leeds offers an innovative second-year module where students work in groups on a 'live' project, often with partners in the city, such as museums and galleries, charitable organisations and arts institutions. Using reflexive models such as Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, students are encouraged to think carefully about what they are observing and doing, and test out what they have learnt in real time. Complex real-world problems require complex interdisciplinary solutions, and Liberal Arts students are well-prepared across all of their programmes to develop and enact these. Overall, Liberal Arts programmes help to produce well-rounded, curious, questioning students who are not afraid to be out of their comfort zone, and who do not require intellectual spoon-feeding. This is why the work that they produce – some of which is featured in this special focus section – is not only of high quality, but also makes a reader think about something (or someone) in a way they might not have done before.

In my six years of involvement with Liberal Arts, I have been one of the co-founders of the Liberal Arts Northern Network (LANN), a collaboration between the Liberal Arts programmes at the Universities of Manchester, York, Durham and Leeds. Each year, we hold an undergraduate conference that brings together students from all stages of Liberal Arts programmes to share what they are working on, engage in creative workshops on belonging and community, and think about skills development in a holistic way. We have held four of these annual conferences to date, and each time the Liberal Arts students that I have encountered have been outstanding: well-rounded, curious, supportive and questioning. I have felt challenged as an educator, in the best way possible, because they want to push the boundaries of disciplinary knowledge and make their mark on the world. It has been a privilege to be in a classroom with them, watching in-depth, critical learning and confidence unfold.

It is through LANN, and the connections that Liberal Arts Directors nationally have made together, that the idea for a special focus section emerged. It became clear to us very quickly that students were producing innovative and interesting work that deserved to be read by more than a small number of assessment markers. Part of the beauty of Liberal Arts is the challenge to established disciplinary boundaries, and along with this comes a challenge to who can and should be participating in

scholarship. Partnering with *Reinvention*, a journal that shares a similar ethos of promoting multi-disciplinary undergraduate work, was a natural fit.

The articles in this section are all very different in focus, and they reflect the diverse interests of the students themselves. There are some core themes that unite them, however. Ideas of justice and inequality, new technology and culture, sustainability and global challenges underpinned by ideas of power are linking threads across the articles featured in this edition, as well as others that we are hoping to publish in future. The students have all used different methods and theories to make their arguments, and sometimes the things that they say are unexpected. This is the beauty of Liberal Arts, and I invite readers to try to become comfortable with the discomfort that an article might provoke, and subsequently to reflect on what happens when we truly engage with scholarship that just might challenge our long-held assumptions about the world and our place in it.

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