

Global Liberal Education: Contradictory Trends and Heightened Controversy

Mary-Ellen Boyle

Liberal education (also known as liberal arts, liberal arts and sciences) expanded globally during the first two decades of this century, with dynamism continuing today. Schools and programs are opening and closing; professional networks are starting and disbanding; and scholarly books and conferences are offering critical analyses as well as pragmatic assistance. The dynamism is characterized by differentiation and politicization: Schools are distinguishing themselves from each other and distancing themselves from US models, as Western values are being challenged and indigenous approaches created.

What Is Liberal Education, And Where Is It Offered?

Liberal education is easiest to define by what it is not: It offers an alternative to specialist and professional education at the postsecondary level. Sometimes mistakenly equated with general education, its core characteristics include comprehensive multidisciplinary knowledge, along with fostering intellectual qualities such as critical thinking, communication, creativity, learning to learn, problem solving, and social responsibility. Pedagogies are interactive and student-centered. These characteristics prevail across the cultures, nations, and regions that adopt the philosophy, suggesting universal agreement about core practices. These characteristics are not inherently politicized, but the term “liberal” has connotations of freedom and choice, values that are not embraced worldwide. Hence the controversy.

Based on the above definition, over 200 schools and programs have been identified outside the United States, up from about 100 at the turn of the century. The increase can be attributed to the overall expansion and continued differentiation in the tertiary sector, with growth primarily, but not entirely, in Asia—China in the lead. Efforts have also begun in places as diverse as Argentina, Germany, Ghana, and the UAE, with schools or programs now found in approximately 60 countries. Much of this growth has been explicitly US influenced, while other efforts reference European, Muslim, or Confucian traditions—or claim to be modern innovations. At the same time, a handful of schools have closed or discontinued their liberal education foci, typically because of leadership, politics, and/or finances.

This dynamism and growth in the sector have generated a burst of scholarly literature. Emerging research is addressing thorny questions about purpose and politics, since liberal education is found even in illiberal regimes. Comparative case studies show the nature of differentiation across and within nations, and studies of classroom activity address how to nurture the qualities of mind associated with liberal education. Access and affordability remain key research and policy making topics.

Contradictory Trends: Convergence and Differentiation

Even with the sharp spike in programs of late, liberal education will not surpass specialized tertiary education any time soon. Yet the numbers and visibility are such that impact can be analyzed. By adding liberal education to their arrays of postsecondary offerings, national systems are becoming more like each other, i.e., converging. The numerous case studies published reveal that this is not liberal education in name only—practitioners describe genuine efforts to teach differently, to gain from the experiences of educators elsewhere, and to position their students for success, defined broadly. At the worldwide level, convergence has also been intensified by efforts to create global

Abstract

This article defines global liberal education, summarizes global and regional trends, and assesses current key issues including politicization and pandemic impact. It is argued that the waning US influence in global geopolitics has resulted in the acceleration of indigenous efforts as well as innovative approaches to integrating the global and the local.

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alliances or international networks of liberal arts schools. However, these global alignments are increasingly being replaced by regional convergences and differentiation.

Scholars and practitioners use geopolitical terminology to distinguish the interpretations of liberal education found around the globe. Three regions, defined broadly, dominate the discourse: Europe, Asia, and the United States. These geopolitical descriptors are found in book titles and articles, as well as in regionally named professional associations, networks, and blogs. Regional convergences can be described as follows:

- ▶ The European “resurgence” serves elites, with goals of excellence and tradition. A research orientation and multiple languages are typical. The Erasmus program has published a guide.
- ▶ The Asian approach is utilitarian and international, serving economies in need of entrepreneurial thinking, creativity, and global adaptability. Research on these innovations is flourishing.
- ▶ The American interpretation is democratic and inclusive, with contestation, embeddedness, and diversity as constituent elements. Claims of decline are debated widely.

Notably, the European and Asian interpretations occur within the bounds of their geographic regions. In contrast, explicitly “American-style” liberal education exists outside as well as within the United States. These American-style schools outside of the United States are straightforward exports—attempts to replicate US liberal education, buttressed by US structures (in terms of accreditation, cooperation agreements, funding), and designed to advance US ideals. Such schools are in several categories: self-named “American” universities and colleges, found in 50 countries; those that have accreditation from US agencies; and branch campuses/high-profile partnerships. Several of these American outposts have become political flashpoints, as described below.

With or without American influence, and notwithstanding the geographic region, liberal education across the globe has been growing increasingly differentiated at the level of the individual school/program. Variety is seemingly limitless, and may reflect national priorities, the founders’ passions, or prior experiences of the faculty, staff, and/or families. As further illustration of variability, liberal education was integrated into comprehensive research universities (Hong Kong, the Netherlands), emerged as a pilot project within existing state structures (Argentina, China), grew out of religious traditions (Indonesia, Israel), or began independently (Ghana, Italy). Curricular foci, too, are numerous—e.g., from great books to climate change research, global languages and cultures to ethical leadership, and more. This diversity illustrates the malleability of liberal education in practice, given a shared set of core characteristics.

Heightened Controversy and Politicization

More a philosophy than a prescriptive model, the ideals of liberal education have long been associated with the West, particularly the beliefs about academic freedom and democratic participation that are prevalent in the United States. Yet, as liberal education proliferates and global balances of power shift, these Western values are being challenged. Several recent high-profile changes have brought global attention to the sector: the surprising dissolution of the Yale-NUS partnership (described in [Hoe Yeong Loke’s article](#) in this issue), the Russian expulsion of a Bard College (US) program, the relocation of Central European University from Hungary to Vienna, and the abrupt closure of the American University of Afghanistan. The narrowing of the Chinese space with respect to Fulbright exchanges and Confucius Institutes has also generated concern and controversy, not limited to liberal education. As authoritarian political regimes gain sway, liberal education is buffeted.

Yet, while these retreats from US collaboration are notable, they are by no means universal. NYU Abu Dhabi is enthusiastically celebrating its 10th anniversary, the Duke Kunshan partnership in China remains strong, and the Harvard-supported Fulbright University in Vietnam appears vital. Start-ups continue, notably in Nepal and Sicily, advised by experts from American universities and veterans of other global efforts. With US influence waning, it is increasingly common to acknowledge the intent to adapt American-style liberal education to local circumstances. Some global advocates would like to create new terminology (eschewing “liberal”) because of both its political connotations and lack of clarity. Philanthropist George Soros is taking an analogous approach,

funding an Open Society University Network with Bard and its international liberal education partners, with the explicit goal to “counteract polarization by promoting global collaboration in research and education to examine issues from different perspectives.”

Such evolution in interpretations and nomenclature is anticipated in theories of educational transfer asserting that ideas and practices that come from elsewhere are eventually claimed (and indigenized) by the borrowing culture. Moreover, this development suggests that the sector overall is resilient: It can adapt creatively and relatively quickly. At the same time, the political backlash was perhaps inevitable, given rising authoritarianism around the world and waning US power.

The increase in controversy and politicization is not the only challenge facing the global liberal education sector. Full assessment must take the COVID-19 pandemic into account: With student mobility severely limited, the programs that depended upon international students, particularly study abroad, have lost revenues and must retrench. Travel restrictions have stimulated interest in local options, resulting in unanticipated enrollment growths in certain settings. Pandemic adaptations also spurred appreciation of online and hybrid learning, thereby testing the schools and programs designed around the residential college experience.

In conclusion, liberal education is firmly established as a global phenomenon with ongoing investment, scholarly interest, and innovation. Several high-profile closures will not be enough to disrupt the entire sector, since global schools and programs are dispersed, variable, and interconnected. Resistance to change is inevitable—and informative, keeping us all aware of neonationalist dangers and China’s long shadow. ▲

Mary-Ellen Boyle is associate professor of management at Clark University, Worcester, US. Email: mboyle@clarku.edu.