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# Prospects of the Liberal Arts Educational Model in the National History Study

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## Abstract

The purpose of the research is to formulate the main problems that impede the introduction of the Liberal Arts model to the National history subject, as well as universal recommendations for solving them via comparative qualitative research methods. As a result, MISH can be described as an interdisciplinary and elective way of training, which consists of courses chosen by the student with the help of an academic mentor. In conclusion, liberal education has specific curriculum requirements. It must be interdisciplinary and include basic and additional specializations; the curriculum must be open to the student's choice.

**Keywords:** Liberal, Arts, History, Model, Pedagogical.

## *Perspectivas del modelo educativo de las Artes Liberales en el estudio de historia nacional*

### **Resumen**

El propósito de la investigación es formular los principales problemas que impiden la introducción del modelo de Artes Liberales en el tema de Historia Nacional, así como las recomendaciones universales para resolverlos a través de métodos de investigación cualitativa comparativa. Como resultado, MISH puede describirse como una forma de entrenamiento interdisciplinaria y electiva, que consiste en cursos elegidos por el estudiante con la ayuda de un mentor académico. En conclusión, la educación liberal tiene requisitos curriculares específicos. Debe ser interdisciplinario e incluir especializaciones básicas y adicionales; El currículo debe estar abierto a la elección del estudiante.

**Palabras clave:** liberal, artes, historia, modelo, pedagogía.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Redefinition of the role of universities in creating and selecting values was the result of the cultural status change in modern society. In the history of world pedagogy, universities had the right to determine the criteria for professional competence based on exclusive control over knowledge sources and the logic of learning. However, such rules can no longer be applied to 21<sup>st</sup>-century education (Rothblatt, 2003). The liberal arts model can be defined as a college or university

curriculum aimed at transferring general knowledge and developing general intellectual abilities, in contrast to the professional or technical program. The terms liberal arts or liberal education are often used for describing the more comprehensive concept of liberal arts and sciences education despite the fact that scientists have recognized that science plays an integral role in this concept (Logan & Curry, 2015; Pontes & Albuquerque, 2017).

Many scholars also believe that the concept of liberal humanitarian education is paradoxical in nature, as it is the most stable and changeable in the academic tradition (Axelrod et al., 2001). While some liberal educators emphasized the importance of the classical philosophical tradition, which immerses the student in ancient and biblical texts, others held a humanistic perspective, which, mainly through literature, opens up the breadth of human experience and achievements, thereby adapting the student to intellectual freedom. Another aspect of humanitarian education is that its program includes the scientific method, which is widely used by research specialists who learn how to gain new knowledge.

The modern Liberal Arts educational model is based on the medieval seven liberal arts system, which included the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and dialectic studies) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music) (Tubbs, 2014). The value of the modern Liberal Arts system is in the diversity and principal interactivity of the educational process. First of all, students have the opportunity to choose a major and minor (additional) specialization. Secondly, in the Liberal Arts system, the role of teachers is significantly different from the duties of their colleagues in other academic programs. The task of teachers is not to teach students,

giving and checking their knowledge, but to ask questions and accompany them in the process of searching for answers, helping to develop their own critical thinking skills (Rothblatt, 2003; Gaston, 2008).

In spite of the breadth and diversity of the liberal arts model concept, liberal education at the university has clear goals and objectives. Such training refers to the activities aimed at developing intellectual creativity, independence, sustainability and critical thinking. It is also aimed at combining intellectual breadth and special knowledge, understanding and tolerance for different ideas and experiences, as well as conscious participation in the community and the development of effective communication skills. History is one of the main humanitarian subjects. Its relevance only increases in the context of modern knowledge development. There are basic tasks that are set when studying history using the Liberal Arts model. The student must have the following skills:

1. The ability to perceive the modern world as a whole put events into a single picture and understand their relation.

2. Understanding of the immutability of the historical approach to the perception, interpretation, and assessment of the past and the consideration of its realities, taking into account the historical situation in the context of the era; following the principle of historicism.

3. The ability to understand and distinguish the hierarchy of historical processes, that is, to separate the core processes from the private or random processes.

However, the process of organizing this model can be hampered by a number of reasons, which come from both general problems of education in the Russian Federation and problems in teaching and studying history.

## **2. METHODS**

The Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Smolny College) of St. Petersburg State University was the first to introduce significant projects for the introduction of liberal education in Russia. In 1999, together with the American Bard College, it started a multidisciplinary undergraduate program. In 2009, the Institute of Social Sciences (Faculty of Liberal Arts) was founded at the Russian Academy of National Economy and Public Administration.

There are also programs of liberal education at the Higher School of Economics (HSE), for example, a philology program. The essence of the training is not to study ready-made ideas and scientific paradigms, but to provide students with the necessary knowledge of different, often opposed traditions, scientific views and schools, with the aim of forming a student's basic research toolkit. The toolkit will help the student to study any humanitarian problem independently, put forward and test hypotheses, as well as develop their own scientific paradigm. However, given a large number of universities in the Russian Federation, we can conclude that liberal education in the country is not widespread.

In the process of studying the problem of introducing the Liberal Arts model in teaching national history, the main problems were

identified and formulated. These problems can be divided into two aspects: problems of general education and problems occurring directly while teaching the history of the country. The Russian Federation educational system has several features that make it difficult to introduce the Liberal Arts educational model. First of all, it is a theoretical overabundance of educational programs, where teachers only give information to students, without further encouragement of its critical perception and processing.

Liberal education is an educational model with the focus not on the problem of mastering certain knowledge in a fixed program for all, but on the problems of worldview and upbringing one's self. This is also manifested in the isolation of the theory from practice, although these aspects should always interact. Students devote most of their time to searching and processing theoretical information. Later they often face the inability to apply this knowledge in practice, since they did not have such experience during their studies. Moreover, an important aspect of the Liberal Arts program is the development of critical thinking and the ability to think freely.

Only those students who have this skill show more freedom and creativity in communicating with colleagues and teachers, avoiding any patterns in the future. However, some studies conducted at the Russian Federation universities have revealed that students have mastered only basic skills of a critical attitude to information and often do not dare to express their opinions in the classroom when it is different from the opinion of the teacher or other students. The main critical value of liberal education has always been the formation of



critical thinking, which is understood as raising responsibility for the independent choice of subjects throughout training, as well as the development of self-motivation, etc.

The current state of studying and teaching national history and history as a whole is characterized by a number of trends that require an understanding of the role and place of the subject as a university discipline. Of course, the most important component of the course of history is its theoretical section. However, the effectiveness of studying a subject is complicated by its obvious shortcomings in the context of the learning process. First, curriculum information is complex and intense.

A large number of historically important dates, names and facts are poorly assimilated by the majority of students. This often leads to loathing for history as a subject. According to teachers, it makes history one of the most difficult and time-consuming subjects. Also, the situation is complicated by the fact that students need to know both the internal history and external history. Secondly, for students who have a hard time expressing their own opinions and formulating ideas, it is sometimes difficult to understand the peculiarities of a historical event, as well as to formulate their attitude to it, especially if this event was rather ambiguous. The reason for this may also be the lack of a subjective position of the student, that is the attitude and assessment of both their activities and the activities of other people, whether they are historical personalities or other students. Students are not involved in research activities, are not encouraged to search for new information, different opinions about a particular event, as well as to discuss controversial historical phenomena.

The main problem among the problems that currently impede the use of this discipline potential is the insufficient study time. As practice shows, 8-9 lectures and the same number of seminars are devoted to mastering the course of history in some universities. The share of classroom training from the total amount of time allocated for the discipline is slightly more than 33%. Another obstacle is the student's inability to see the prospect of using historical knowledge in their future profession, and this is a direct way to the loss of motivation to study the subject. The following theses can serve as further recommendations for the successful implementation of Liberal Arts programs and models in universities when studying national history.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Having formulated the main problems of modern education in the Russian Federation in the previous paragraph, which hamper the introduction of the Liberal Arts, we developed universal recommendations that could help solve problems in all aspects of education and successfully implement the current liberal education model. These recommendations can be used by teachers and the university administration of humanities departments throughout the country. First of all, an important emphasis should be placed on the personal qualities of students and teachers.

In addition to the development of critical thinking, which is the basic principle of liberal education, the model of the liberal arts and sciences contributes to the development of such important qualities of the modern person as responsibility, tolerance and respect for others, communication skills, ability to work in a team, flexibility. Of course, students when entering a higher institution should already have similar qualities, at least partially. However, these qualities can be successfully developed during university studies. As for critical thinking, there are a large number of programs based on the world experience, which can be taken as a basis when implementing their own program. The development of critical thinking is greatly facilitated by various discussions of relevant or ambiguous topics.

It is very important to create an atmosphere in which students will not be afraid to express their opinion, even if it is different from others, and to disagree with the opinions of their colleagues or teachers. A very important task for the development of critical thinking is writing an essay. The faculty of History, like any humanitarian faculty, includes a large number of written or creative assignments into the program. The task of writing an essay about ambiguous historical events and the attitude of students towards them will be very useful. It is very important to be able to formulate a subjective attitude to the event and assess it while not forgetting to include the opinions of specialists or other historical figures on this issue.

Responsibility, tolerance towards others and ability to work in a team are successfully developed during project work. Students can be divided into groups. Teachers can give them a certain historical epoch or an event and a specific task. Thus, students must learn to interact in collective work and respect each other's opinions, even if they are

different. Moreover, such tasks increase the level of responsibility, since students do not want to let down their team. Of course, liberal arts teachers should already possess the characteristics listed above. This is what could be the main stumbling block in the introduction of liberal education in Russian or other universities.

There are many reasons why teachers do not possess such skills. They are the conservatism of teachers, unwillingness to learn something new or the inability to obtain such knowledge. Therefore, universities should take specific measures to develop the competence of teachers in liberal education. If there is no financial opportunity to send the teaching staff to overseas training or organize the exchange of experience between universities, which is a very effective method, they should organize training within the universities and invite various speakers, experienced teachers and other competent professionals.

During the learning process, it is very important for teachers to check students' written and creative works, write reviews on them, respecting any opinion. In general, the teacher needs to systematically monitor students' learning activities. Teachers must give feedback and reviews on the work performed by students. When implementing the Liberal Arts program, certain rules must be followed. First of all, competent specialists should create adequate dated educational and methodical complex for students.

This complex must set out the goals and objectives of the course, tasks for each lesson, as well as the criteria for evaluating current tasks and passing the exam. When compiling the theoretical part, it is important to select reading texts for each lesson and find

various testing tasks. This may be historical documents, essays or excerpts from books. Moreover, it is also required to make original written and creative tasks for mastering reading texts and developing critical and creative thinking. In addition to traditional essays, these may be mini-studies, creative tasks, projects or reading or reflective diaries.

One of the most innovative components of the liberal education model has become the individual educational trajectory and the ability to choose courses and forms of study. This method has a very beneficial effect on the performance and motivation of students. In addition, when introducing a liberal education, the size of the educational institution is crucial. The form of classroom training should be mainly interactive and the entire student initiative should be actively encouraged by teachers. It is necessary to form groups of students who will include no more than 30-50 people per course. This is explained by the fact that a small group will be able to provide high-quality interaction with the teacher, who will be able to pay attention to each student.

It is very important to correctly implement the liberal education model to teach and study National History successfully. The specifics of teaching within this profile are dialogism, historicism, debating nature, comparative historical perspective, critical analysis of historiographical traditions, nationalism and national mythologies, emphasis on studying the multicultural experience of historical empires and the analysis of historical memory functioning, including controversial and mutually exclusive versions of the past, associated with modern politics. Most of the curriculum should be devoted to the study of the history of modern Russia and the post-Soviet space, since

these periods are the most relevant and key for modern students. Knowledge and understanding of the historical events of these periods provide excellent material for the analysis and critical understanding of the historical experience of a multicultural, multi-confessional and multi-ethnic society and state.

One of the most famous colleges in the field of liberal education is Bard College. This is a private educational institution, which was founded in 1860. The total number of students in college is 1930. The college is situated in the countryside and its territory is 1000 acres. It ranks the 4th the Most Innovative Schools rating, a list of US educational institutions that make the most innovative improvements in terms of curriculum, teachers, students, campus life, technology or facilities. Another popular liberal arts college is Amherst College. The bachelor's degree program at Amherst College has a completely open curriculum with no major modules or restrictions on a variety of subjects or courses that need to be taken in certain years. This college is very selective when admitting students and is located in Massachusetts. Groups of students are extremely small and this is done with the aim of ensuring effective interaction with teachers. About 90 percent of all courses have less than 30 students.

One of Amherst College's main competitors is Williams College, which is also located in Massachusetts. The small academic community consists of about 2,000 students. It takes you four years to get a bachelor's degree in the humanities. The college was founded in 1793, and in some faculties teaching is modeled according to the traditional system of education at the universities of Oxford and

Cambridge in the UK, in which students study face-to-face or in small groups. In American liberal arts colleges, special attention is paid to bachelor's degree programs, which include a wide range of subjects, from exact sciences to humanities. In addition to an interdisciplinary curriculum, the best liberal arts colleges tend to have fewer students than other educational institutions that is why they show a high level of competition. Groups are often small, and the teaching staff tends to pay more attention to teaching than to research. In the USA, all liberal arts colleges have a commercial basis (Levine, 2006).

In general, liberal education in the United States is popular. According to the survey conducted in 2013 by Hart Research Associates on behalf of AAC & U, 74% of employers recommend this educational approach to college students. Considerable attention in American liberal education is given to the study of history. The programs of liberal universities provide a comprehensive curriculum of American and world history courses, in which students are encouraged to be skeptical of all events and think analytically. The cornerstone of student learning is seminars, which include extensive research work as a central component (Lewis, 2006).

Among other European countries, the Netherlands has implemented the largest number of initiatives to organize and create liberal universities. Almost half of the Dutch research universities founded humanitarian educational institutions or introduced specialized programs. Although according to their legislation, this is a long and complicated process. In the Netherlands, there is a binary higher education system consisting of fourteen universities that teach about one-third of students, as well as of about 40 universities of applied science, which accommodate the other two thirds.

Both types of higher education institutions comply with the same legislation and have relatively a high degree of autonomy. However, new programs can only be created after prior accreditation by the national council. In spite of these limitations, the example of the Netherlands has proven that it is possible to develop a variety of liberal arts colleges and programs throughout the country (Sursock & Smidt, 2010; Mendoza Velazco & Rivero Padrón, 2019).

In the Dutch humanitarian universities, students have the opportunity to choose a program which is the most interesting for them, since the next three years they will devote to studying every aspect of those topics. But some topics require additional scientific knowledge, while others need a greater contribution from the social sciences and humanities research.

Two major research universities combined their efforts to create a liberal arts program based on the Amsterdam University College. The program requires perfection from students, preparing them for high performance in the knowledge-based economy of the 21st century. This is stimulated by innovation, equipment and widespread global involvement into a culturally diverse society. The training takes place in small classes in English. It is based on project-based learning. On completion of their studies, students receive the degree of Liberal arts & sciences bachelor.

The curriculum consists of several broad topics, while students from the very beginning of the programs learn to integrate ideas from different disciplines directly into the learning process. These topics focus on far-reaching issues of science and society. At the same time,



students get deep knowledge in their specialty, which allows them to take an active part in interdisciplinary debates. By the end of their studies, they combine their knowledge and experience in one big project.

However, the higher education system in the Netherlands is criticized by reputable organizations. According to OECD, Higher education in the Netherlands demonstrates an insufficient level of differentiation, its strengths and superiority are not well represented, the international aspect should be strengthened and universities should also avoid the early choice of students' main specialization. Liberal education in the Netherlands also pays significant attention to the study of history. Graduates with a bachelor's degree in history are usually engaged in teaching or related academic activities. They also deal with the issues of law, public service or occupy various positions in the business world. In addition, graduates of such a program have the right to get a postgraduate degree in History in order to continue further research.

Liberal education is also developing in Eastern Europe. The end of the Cold War, globalization and the diversification of higher education systems around the world have led to a historically unprecedented increase in the number of humanitarian education programs outside the United States. These programs were independently developed and had a fuzzy idea of classical liberal education. The Polish model of liberal education MISH (Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in the Humanities at the University of Warsaw) proved how the idea of humanitarian education (rather than organization or curriculum) became the prism which made it possible

to observe the development of humanitarian education outside the USA (Siwinska, 2011).

Academia Artes Liberales, which is a project launched in 1996, helped to create MISH and extend its program to 8 other major Polish universities. Currently, about 1500 students are enrolled in this program. Despite the growth of private higher education, two attempts to create a MISH model in Polish private universities were not successful. In spite of the national and international role of MISH, its analytical research was limited and not systematic. Kowalski, a Canadian scholar, described the development of humanitarian education in Poland primarily as a part of the post-Soviet space. Therefore the introduction of liberal models was hampered by old educational standards (Kowalski, 2012; Sohrabi, 2017).

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The model of liberal education on the basis of modern education meets all the requirements and tasks set for the 21st century. Students graduated from similar liberal arts universities are able to compete in the labor market, having all the necessary skills, such as the ability to work in a team and critical thinking, in combination with the knowledge gained. Although in many institutions liberal education is still at a rather experimental stage, its importance and relevance are recognized by scholars and teachers around the world. The process of introducing a liberal education model in Russian humanitarian

universities is hampered by many factors, ranging from internal educational problems to difficulties in teaching and studying humanities, including national history. Also, students themselves must meet the requirements of a liberal university.

Summing up, we can say that liberal education has specific curriculum requirements. It must be interdisciplinary and include basic and additional specializations; the curriculum must be open to the student's choice. Historical courses should be developed with a focus on creative and reflective tasks. Teaching should be student-oriented and free from an authoritarian representation of knowledge. The involvement of students in the development of training courses will also have a very positive effect on the quality of the program. In the formation and introduction of a liberal education model, world experience should be taken into account.

In liberal education, a significant role should be assigned to the study of History as one of the key humanitarian subjects. Students of history must be able to think critically, communicate effectively, understand and value diversity, as well as to take into account national historical traditions while evaluating and presenting different interpretations of the past. They must find scientific evidence and use it to explain the meaning and role of events in local, national and global contexts. These developments can be used by academic teachers and university administration across the Russian Federation to successfully implement this program and solve current and urgent problems both in the educational system and in teaching national history.

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