What are universities for?

From medieval seminary to the consultancy campus, universities have served the needs of society—but those needs have gone beyond economic success or technological advance.

KEITH THOMAS

less of whether they really need them; the diminishing esteem attached to teaching as opposed to research; the replacement of collegiality in university government by hierarchy and "management"; the high salaries paid to vice-chancellors and other university administrators; and the barbarous prose in which they and government agencies announce their latest diktats. In the *New York Review of Books* (March 10), the great American scholar Anthony Grafton notes with sorrow that British universities, once the envy of the world, now face a crisis of mind and spirit.

There is nothing new or unreasonable about the government's demand that academicians should contribute to society at large. Universities have existed in Britain for 800 years. For most of that period, their social function was to transmit to a select band of students the knowledge and intellectual skills that would qualify them for the service of Church and State. In the medieval universities (Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews, Glasgow and Aberdeen), the arts curriculum (which included mathematics and natural science) was envisaged as a preparatory course that would enable students to move on to one of the three higher faculties of Theology, Law and Medicine, all of them vocational subjects. In medieval Oxford, academics made original contributions to logic, physics and theology, but their essential role was to sustain the Christian religion and to supply graduates for ecclesiastical and royal administration. In the words of the medievalist Sir Richard Southern, "No single cause had so much influence on the development of higher studies as the demands of government". After the Protestant Reformation, the desire for religious conformity led to frequent state intervention in university affairs. Purged of Catholic dissidents, the universities were expected to produce a learned ministry who would provide ideological justification for the new regime. Like a modern research council, the Church of England had its "thematic priorities", to which academics were expected to direct their studies. The BA course shifted from its medieval emphasis on logic to a greater concern with rhetoric and classical literature. Oxford and Cambridge increasingly attracted students who had no intention of taking up a clerical career, but who studied the classics because they contained a wide range of useful knowledge, and because a literary and rhetorical education developed the writing and speaking skills needed by the governing elite of gentry, lawyers and royal servants.

During the seventeenth century, the use of Latin in daily life diminished and the technical knowledge offered by classical authors became increasingly obsolete. Pressure to modernize the curriculum mounted. First to change were the Scottish universities, who in the eighteenth century excelled in medicine, science, law and philosophy, and pioneered economics and historical sociology. Oxford and Cambridge stagnated, but remained impregnable because of their importance as seminaries for the Anglican Church. They also provided the political class with a cohesive, classically based culture.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, the universities continued to regard their main purpose as the provision of appropriate mental training for an intellectual and social elite. Although Oxford and Cambridge occasionally produced notable scientists and scholars, the advancement of learning, as opposed to its transmission, was not an essential activity for academics, most of whom anyway spent only a few years in the university before moving on to a church living. Save in Scotland, most vigorous forms of intellectual activity took place outside academia altogether. Gibbon, Macaulay, Faraday and Darwin did not work in universities.

The German conception of a university as a place where teaching was accompanied by original research was exemplified by the University of Berlin, founded in 1810. The idea did not take root in England until the later nineteenth century, when the notion of the university as a knowledge-producing institution strongly appealed to those who believed that Britain's industrial and military success required a vigorous scientific culture. From 1850 onwards, the State repeatedly intervened to reform Oxford and Cambridge by royal commissions and Acts of Parliament. The Anglican monopoly was broken; the celibacy requirement abolished; new honour schools were founded; and "learning and research" became an official academic objective.

By the end of the century, there had emerged in Britain a recognizably modern academic profession. The torch of literary culture, previously carried by the metropolitan man of letters and the serious Victorian periodical, was taken over by the professor and the learned journal. In the provinces, the fore-runners of the civic universities appeared, all of them located in industrial cities and, initially at least, much concerned with the application of science to the world of business and manufacture, though also giving a high status to the humanities.

There was another royal commission after the First World War, but thereafter, the universities were allowed to develop in their own way, supported by state financial aid, but largely free from governmental interference. In 1919 the University Grants Committee (UGC) was set up to distribute the Treasury Grant, in accordance with its own criteria. The universities were expected to engage in scholarship to advance knowledge
and to train young minds in a non-vocational way. As J. M. Keynes put it in 1927, "Their business is to develop a man's intelligence and character in such a way that he can pick it up relatively quickly the special details of the business to turn to subsequently," After the Second World War, an increasing volume of public funding was devoted to enabling students to attend universities regardless of their means. In retrospect, it seems a golden age of academic freedom.

In the 1980s, the relationship between universities and the State changed dramatically. Though favouring deregulation in the economic and financial sphere, Margaret Thatcher's government was strongly élitist when it came to the universities. Convinced that anti-entrepreneurial attitudes among academics were responsible for Britain's economic decline, it abolished the UGC and replaced it by Funding Councils, which, instead of acting as a buffer between the government and the universities, as the UGC had done, took their orders direct from the Secretary of State. In 1987, in a letter to the TLS, a junior minister, Robert Jackson, announced that "the apparatus and ethos of the self-regarding academic producer must be dismantled." In order to eliminate what Jackson called "the latest corruption of the porker's freehold," tenures was abolished and the idea of an academic market warmly encouraged. Universities had to compete against each other for staff and research funding, as well as for students (or "consumers"). Flexibility replaced standard salary scales, thus enabling universities to emulate football clubs in vying to buy "star" professors who would improve their performance in the newly devised assessment of academic "output," which determined how much research funding they would receive. Universities were encouraged to exploit their intellectual property by taking out patents, forming business partnerships and creating science parks and "spin-off" companies. No one talked any longer of the free movement of ideas, or recalled the medieval adage that knowledge was a gift of God which should not be sold. Thus was born the modern entrepreneurial university, an imitation of the American model, pioneered by Stanford and MIT, in which universities seek research contracts from industrial, pharmaceutical and military concerns, and encourage their members to act as consultants to outside businesses. Universities took on more functions, building large-scale hotel and catering facilities for meetings and conferences, staging concerts and sporting events, collaborating with the regional economy, developing overseas campuses, and (in the case of Oxford and Cambridge) becoming major international publishers. The traditional university, made up of teachers and students, gave way to what Clark Kerr, in his classic The Uses of the University, called the "multiversity": a pluralist amalgam of different functions, serving different constituencies and lacking any single purpose.

The management of these often huge institutions became increasingly bureaucratic, not least because of the government's increasing demands for data of every kind. Universities ceased to be governed by communities of academics. Instead, there developed a managerial class, led by vice-chancellors who saw themselves as thrusting business executives rather than self-effacing ancillaries, and paid themselves accordingly, typically three or four times as much as a professor.

These changes coincided with the shift from elite to mass higher education. In 1939 university students in the UK were still a tiny minority: 3 per cent of the relevant age group. In 1963 the Robbins Committee recommended that there should be places for all qualified applicants who wanted them. New universities were founded and by 1979 the participation rate had risen to 12.4 per cent. In 1992, the polytechnics, which had originally been intended to provide a vocational and technical education, were permitted to turn themselves into universities. This altered the statistics dramatically.

Today there are nearly 170 universities and institutions of higher education in the UK, with over 170,000 academic staff and nearly 2.5 million students. At the most recent count, the participation rate is 43 per cent. Going to "uni" has ceased to be the aspiration of a select few and become a rite of passage. Despite the fiction of "parity of esteem," it is true that the University of Cambridge and the University of Oxford have long been the top universities in the UK, with about 40 per cent of students going to these two institutions. The old divide between Russell Group and polytechnics has largely disappeared, and many students now go to universities that were formerly polytechnics.

The Power

Forget all of that end-of-the-pier palm-reading stuff. Picture a seaside town in your head. Start from its salt-wrack-zinnia smells and raise the lid of the world to change the light, then go as far as you want: the ornament of a promenade, the brilliant greys of gulls, the weak grip of a crane in the arcades you've built, ballrooms to come alive at night, then a million-starling roost, the opulent crumbling like cake icing . . .

Now, bring it down in the kind of fire that flows along ceilings, that knows the spectral blues; that always starts in donut fryers or boardwalk kindling in the dead hour before dawn, that leaves piles marooned by mindless tidies, that sends a plume of black smoke high enough to scorch the halls of clouds. Now look around your tiny room and tell me that you haven't got the power.

PAUL FARLEY
science and technology that the universities of China aspire to lead the world; and the much-cited Shanghai Jiao Tong World Ranking of Universities is based on criteria which take no account of the humanities at all.

Humane scholarship is a vital activity, for without it we would quickly relapse into ignorant solipsism, with no knowledge of the past or comprehensiveness of other languages and cultures. We need scholars to resist the annihilation of our intellectual inheritance, to expose myths and to remind us that there are other ways of thinking and acting than those with which we are familiar. Not all such work can be described as "research". When scientists do research, they aim to find out things which have never been known. But much activity in the humanities is concerned to rediscover and re-interpret what once was known but has subsequently been forgotten. A better word for this is "scholarship", with its emphasis less on new knowledge than on fresh understanding.

The new government should affirm its commitment to the notion of universities as places of humane scholarship as well as of scientific research. This involves investment in the postgraduate courses necessary to ensure a future supply of scholars and the continuation of a research element in the block grants to universities. But the primary purpose of mass higher education should remain the formation of men and women with the intellectual skills, independence of mind and mental flexibility needed by a rapidly changing society. It might be possible to reduce some courses in vocational subjects from three years to two. But if further cuts have to be made, then, rather than slashing the number of student places, it would be preferable to reduce the sums made available to the research councils, not least by ceasing to attach "full economic costs" to project funding, a practice which encourages universities to make excessive applications for grants because they are so profitable.

Students have always regarded university education as a route to a better job and curricula have repeatedly changed to suit new circumstances. But the present economic crisis has not made the humanities irrelevant. On the contrary, linguistic sensitivity, the capacity to evaluate an argument, an understanding of the past and an awareness of cultural difference remain indispensable for any kind of public activity. In a multi-ethnic Britain and a troubled world, a liberal education is a precondition of intelligent citizenship and international understanding. The new government should be concerned that in the secondary schools, GCSE History is attempted by less than a third of students, and that many of those who take the subject further know nothing of what happened before the twentieth century. It should be worried that Classics survives only in some independent schools and that the decline in the study of modern languages has been spectacular.

The humanities offer an indispensable antidote to the vices which inevitably afflict a democratic, capitalist society. They counter the dumbing down of the media by asserting the complexity of things; and they challenge the evasiveness and mendacity of politicians by placing a premium on intellectual honesty. They also, as Martha Nussbaum emphasized, foster critical thinking about all forms of authority. Soviet Russia and modern China remind us that obsessive concentration on science and technology can be accompanied by indifference to human freedom.

Universities have always served the needs of society and should continue to do so. But those needs go beyond mere economic success. Until the last century, learning was advanced by cultivated members of the leisure class and by those scholars and scientists who managed to obtain some form of patronage. Some original scholarship still takes place outside academia, notably in the field of biography. But the universities have become the chief promoters of that quintessentially human activity, inquiry for inquiry's sake. They cherish science and mathematics as life-enhancing pursuits, regardless of any practical application they may have; and they nourish the humanities, which, by increasing our understanding of art, literature, music, history, religion and philosophy, make our existence more intelligible, more meaningful and more enjoyable.

Governments are right to devote resources to ensuring the people's economic prosperity and physical health. But those goods are not ends in themselves. As Sir Joshua Reynolds once remarked, "Commerce is the means, not the end of happiness or pleasure: the end is a rational enjoyment of life, by the means of arts and sciences". Or, as A. E. Housman wrote: "A life spent, however victoriously, in securing the necessities of life is no more than elaborate furnishing and decoration of apartments for the reception of a guest who is never to come". We cannot determine the purpose of universities without first asking, "What is the purpose of life?"
COMMENTARY

Skills for life

Why cuts in humanities teaching pose a threat to democracy itself

MARTHA C. NUSSBAUM

Modern nations are heterogeneous, and a still more heterogeneous world, understanding something of the history and character of the diverse groups that inhabit it. Knowledge is no guarantee of good behaviour, but ignorance is a virtual guarantee of bad behaviour.

Does global citizenship really require the humanities? It certainly requires a lot of factual knowledge, and students might get this without a humanistic education – for example, from absorbing the facts in standardized textbooks (assuming these are correct). Responsible citizenship, however, requires a lot more: the ability to assess historical evidence, to use and think critically about economic principles, to compare differing views of social justice, to speak a foreign language, to appreciate the complexities of the major

The resolution of differences, both within a nation and in a world increasingly polarized by ethnic and religious conflict.

The Socratic ideal, however, is under severe strain because we are bent on maximizing economic growth. The ability to think and argue for one's own reasoning, and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason, is essential to the peaceful

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Commentary

ingly high. Still relatively common in the United States, with its liberal arts model, it is difficult to go unnoticed in many European and Asian Länder and their countries, where students enter university to read a single subject and do not have liberal arts requirements in the first place, and where the now normal mode of teaching involves large lectures, with little or no active participation by students or little or no feedback. Yet the aspiration to make even elementary and secondary classrooms Socratic is not utopian; it is well within the reach of any community that respects the minds of its children and the needs of democracy.

Starting in the eighteenth century, thinkers in Europe, North America, and, prominently, India began to break away from the model of education as rote learning and to pursue experiments in which the child was an active and critical participant. European, progressive reforms—theirs of, for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Johann Pestalozzi and Friedrich Froebel—had a large and formative influence in the United States through the work of Bronson Alcott and Horace Mann in the nineteenth century, and of John Dewey, undoubtedly the most influential, effective, and inspiring American practitioner of Socratic education, in the twentieth. Unlike his European predecessors, Dewey lived and taught in a thriving democracy, and the production of marketable, respectable citizens was his central goal. Dewey’s experiments have left a profound mark on early education in America, as has his emphasis on the interconnectedness of the world and his focus on the arts.

However, there is something in Dewey’s model that uses Socratic values to produce a certain type of citizen: critical, curious, capable of resisting authority and peer pressure. But what is happening today? In many nations in Europe and Asia, and in India. Socrates either never was in fashion or went out of fashion long ago. The US is somewhat better off because Dewey and his Socratic experiments have had widespread influence. But things are rapidly changing, and we are close to the collapse of the Socratic ideal.

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citizens cannot relate well to the complex interconnected system by facts, knowledge and logic alone. The third ability of the citizen, closely related to those two, is what we can call the narrative imagination. This means the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of this person’s story, to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have. The cultivation of sympathy has been a key part of the best modern ideas of democratic education, in both Western and non-Western nations. Much of this cultivation must take place in the family, but schools, and even colleges and universities, also play an important role. If they are to play it well, they must give a central place in the curriculum to the humanities and the arts, which activate and refine the capacity to see the world through another person’s eyes—a capacity that children develop through imaginative play.

According to the British paediatrician and psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, play takes place in the space between people—what Winnicott called the “zone ofproximity,” first children, then adults, experiment with the idea of otherwise in ways that are less threatening than the direct encounter with another may often be. The presence of the other becomes, in play, a source of delight and curiosity, and this curiosity contributes toward the development of healthy attitudes in friendship, love and, later, political life, as Winnicott often emphasized. Democratic equality brings vulnerability. As one of Winnicott’s patients perceptively remarked, “The alarming thing about equality is that we are then both children and the question is, where is father? We know where we are if one of us is the father”. Play teaches people to be capable of living with others without control; it connects the experiences of vulnerability and surprise with curiosity and wonder, rather than with crippling anxiety. In the adult’s sophisticated response to a complex work of art, Winnicott saw a continuation of the baby’s delight in gestures and role-playing, and he saw the primary function of the arts in human life as, all that, of nourishing and extending the capacity for empathy.

Progressive educators, especially early on, that the most important contribution of the arts to life after school was that of strengthening the personality’s emotional and imaginative resources, the ability to understand both others and oneself. The most elaborative development of the arts as “spontaneous of early education,” however, awaited the twentieth century and the theoretically sophisticated experiments of Tagore in India and Dewey in the US. Dewey insisted that what is important for children is not some contemplative exercise in which children learn to “appreciate” works of art in things cut off from the real world, but should be taught to believe that imagination is pertinent only in the domain of the unreal or imaginary. Instead, they need to see an imaginative dimension in all their interactions, and to see works of art as just one domain in which imagination is cultivated. In particular, the primary role played by the arts was the cultivation of sympathy, and he asserted that this role for education had been “systematically ignored” and “severely repressed” by standard models. The arts, in his view, promote both inner self-cultivation and responsiveness to others. The two typical and development in tandem, since one can hardly cherish in another what one has not explored in oneself.

All societies at all times have their particular blind spots, groups both within their culture and abroad that are especially likely to be dealt with ignorantly and obtusely. Ralph Ellison, in a later essay about his great novel Invisible Man, wrote that a novels such as his could be “a raft of perception, hope, and entertainment” on which American culture could “negotiate the snags and whirlpools” that stand between us and our democratic ideal. Through the imagination, he suggests, we are able to develop our ability to see the full humanness of people with whom our encounters in daily life are likely to be superficial at best, at worst infected by demeaning stereotypes—particularly when our world has constructed itself in at least three groupings, and suspicions that make any encounter difficult. His novel, of course, takes the “inner eyes” of the white reader as its theme and its target. The hero is invisible to white society, but he tells us that this invisibility is an insinuative and educational failing on our part, not a biological accident on his.

In Ellison’s America, the central challenge for the “inner eyes” was—that of race, a stigmatized position almost impossible for the conventional wiser reader to inhabit. For Tagore, a particular cultural blind spot was the agency and difference of women. Both claim that information about social stigma and inequality will not convey the full understanding a democratic citizen needs, without participatory experience of the stigmatized position, which theatre and literature both enable. Their reflections suggest that schools and colleges that omit the arts omit essential occasions for democratic understanding. We need to cultivate students’ “inner eyes”. In other words, the role of the arts in schools and colleges is twofold: they cultivate capacities to play and empathy in a general way, and they address particular cultural blind spots.

The cultivation of imagination is closely linked to the Socratic capacity for criticism of dead or inadequate traditions, and provides essential support for that critical activity. One can hardly treat another person’s intellectual position respectfully unless one at least tries to understand the outlook on life that is distributed the life and the world. But there is something further that the arts contribute. The arts, by generating pleasure in connection with acts of understanding, subversion, and co-option, are the most endurable and even attractive dialogue with the prejudices of the past, rather than on fraught with fear and defensiveness. That is what Ellison meant by calling Invisible Man “a raft of perception, hope, and entertainment”. Entertainment is crucial to the ability of the artist to offer perception and hope. The national interest of any modern democracy requires both economy and a flourishing business culture. A flourishing economy in turn requires the same skills that support citizenship, so the proponents of what is called “education for economic growth” (more comprehensively “education, for economic growth”, have adopted an impoverished conception of what is needed to meet their own goals. But, since a strong economy is a means to human ends, not an end in itself, this argument is less important than the argument for the development of democratic institutions. Most of us would not choose to live in a prosperous nation that had ceased to be democratic. Yet what is on everyone’s lips is the need for policies that promote national development is the form of economic growth. Such an education has recently been outlined by the Spellings Commission Report of the US Department of Education, focusing on higher education. It is being implemented by many European nations, as they give high marks to technical universities and university departments and impose increasingly draconian cuts on the humanities.

The United States has never had a purely growth-directed model of education. Some distinctive and by now traditional features of our system positively resist being cast in these terms. Unlike virtually every nation in the world, we have a liberal arts model of university education. Instead of entering college/university to study a single subject, students are required to take a wide range of courses in their first two years, including courses in the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. This has meant that students are exposed to a wide range of perspectives and ideas, and are encouraged to think critically about the world and their place in it.
COMMENTARY

The liberal arts are a vestige of elitism or class distinction. From early on, leading US educators connected the liberal arts to preparation for informed, independent, and sympathetic democratic citizens. The liberal arts model is still relatively strong, but it is under severe stress now in this time of economic hardship.

What sort of education does the old model of development suggest? Education for economic growth needs basic skills, literacy, and numeracy. It also needs some people to have more advanced skills in computer science and technology. Equal access, however, is not terribly important; a nation can grow very nicely while the rural poor remain illiterate and without basic computer resources, as recent events in many Indian states show. This was always the first and most basic problem with the GNP/capita paradigm of development. It neglects distribution, and can give high marks to nations or states that contain alarming inequalities. This is very true of education: given the nature of the information economy, nations can increase their GNP/capita only so much about the distribution of education, so long as they create 1 competent technology and business elite.

Here is yet another way in which the United States has traditionally diverged, at least in theory, from the economic growth paradigm. In the US tradition of public education, ideas of equal opportunity and equal access, though never robust in reality, have always been national goals, defended even by the most growth-focused politicians, such as the authors of the Spellings Report. No system of education is doing a good job if its benefits reach only wealthy elites. It has long been a shameful feature of the United States, a wealthy nation, that access to quality primary education and especially access to college/university education is so unequally distributed. After basic skills for many, and more advanced skills for some, education for economic growth needs a very rudimentary familiarity with history and with economic facts. This is not to suggest that this will work out to be a relatively small elite. But care must be taken lest the historical and economic narrative lead to any serious critical thinking about the present. As in the global food question, there is some about whether foreign investment is really good for the rural poor, about whether democracy is a necessary condition in the basic-life chances chain. So critical thinking would not be a very important part of education for economic growth. The student's freedom of mind is dangerous if what is wanted is a group of technically trained obedient workers to carry out the plans of elites who are aiming at foreign investment and technological development. Thus educators for economic growth will not want a study of history that focuses on injustices of class, caste, gender, and ethno-religious minorities, because this will prompt critical thinking about the present. Nor will such educators want a serious consideration of, say, the rise of nationalism, of the damaged done by nationalistic ideas, and of the way in which the moral imagination too often becomes numbed under the weight of powerlessness.

What about the arts and literature, so often valued by democratic educators? An education for economic growth will, first of all, have contempt for these parts of a child's training, because they don't look as if they lead to personal or national economic advancement. But educators for economic growth will do more than ignore the arts. They will fear them. For a cultivated and developed sympathy is a particularly dangerous enemy of clueness, and moral obnubility is necessary to carry out processes of economic development that ignore inequali- ty. It is easier to treat people as objects to be manipulated if you have never learnt any other way to see them. Aggressive nationalistic- ism needs to blunt the moral conscience, so it needs people who do not recognize the indi- vidual, who speak group speech, who behave, and see the world, like docile bureaucrats. Art is a great enemy of that obnubility, and artists (unless thoroughly browbeaten and cor- rupted) are not the reliable servants of any ideology, even a basically good one — they always ask the imagination to move beyond its usual confines, to see the world in new ways. So, education for economic growth will castigate against the humanities and arts as impediments to basic economic growth.

Yet, as with critical thinking, so too with the arts: we discover that they are essential for the goal of economic growth. Leading the arts, and those who have a developed capacity to imagine is a keynote of a healthy business culture. Innovation requires minds that are flexible, open, and creative; literature and the arts cultivate these capacities. Where they are lacking, a busi- ness culture quickly loses steam. Again and again, liberal arts graduates are tipped in prefer- ence to students who have had a narrower set-professional education, precisely because they are believed to have the flexibility and the creativity to succeed in a dynamic busi- ness environment. If only concern were for economic and political contributions, we should still protect humanistic liberal arts education.

The arts, it is said, are just too costly. We can't afford them in a time of economic hardship. Yet art need not be expensive to promote. Storytelling, music and dance, draw- ing and figure: these are powerful avenues of expression for costs far below the cost of most human activity. I would argue that a type of education that gets both students and teachers more passionately about the arts, and thus reduces costs, by reducing the anomie and time-wasting that typically accompany a lack of connection and interest in the arts. Drew Faust, it put recently, "Human beings need meaning, understanding, and per- spective as well as jobs. The question should not be whether we can afford to believe in such purposes in these times, but whether we can afford not to".

How is education for democratic citizen- ship doing in the world today? Poorly. Fear it. It is still doing rea- sonably well in the place where I first studied it, namely the liberal arts portion of US college and university curricula. This part of the liberal arts, in teaching me how to think for myself, still attracts generous philanthropic support, as rich people remember with pleas- ure the time when they read books that they might never have read otherwise. It is true that during the recent economic crisis, we have even seen an increase in commitment, as charit- able donors who value the humanities dig deeper in order to preserve what they love. One reason we have been able to argue so effectively that the liberal arts portion of college and university education is the US now supports democratic citizenship better than it did fifty years ago, when students learnt little about the world outside Europe and North America, or about minorities in their own nation. New areas of study such as women's studies or ethnic studies have been introduced into liberal arts courses for all students, have enhanced their understanding of non-Western nations, of the global economy, of race relations, of the dynamics of gender, of the history of migration and the struggles of new groups for recognition and equality. Young people these days rarely leave college as ignorant about the non-Western world as students of my own generation were, and even further, have taken part in the teaching of literature and the arts: students are exposed to a far wider range of materials, and their "inner eyes" are cultivated by being exposed to the experi- ences of people of many different types, both within their own nation and abroad.

We cannot be complacent, however. Democratic and support for the arts in the US and the world economic crisis has led many universities to make deep cuts in humanities and arts pro- gramming. Other areas have also had to make deep cuts. But the arts have been widely perceived as inessential. It is the time for them to be downsized, and for some departments to be eliminated completely. Even where cuts do not threaten whole depart- ments, they threaten the health of depart- ments, that is why they are not vacated, and facility who remain become overworked and unable to do their job well. In Europe, with different traditions of higher education and no strong encouragement, through tax incentives, of humanistic philan- thropy or private endowment, things are far worse. The pressure for economic growth has led many European political leaders to recast the whole of university education — both teaching and research — along growth-oriented lines, asking about the contribution of each discipline and each researcher to the economy. (Stefan Collini presented a devas- tating picture of the situation in the "New Statesman" in November 2009.) In India the desirability of the humanities began long ago, with Nehru's emphasis on economic progress and the role of the national future. Despite his own deep love for poetry and literature, which informs his political language, and which he himself concluded that modes of emotional and imagi- native understanding exist to take a back seat to science and technology, and his views pre- vailed.

The abilities of citizenship are doing very poorly, in every nation, in the most crucial years of children's lives, up to the set of twelve. Here the demands of the global market have made everyone focus on scien- tific and technical proficiency as the key abili- ties, while the humanities and the arts, to the extent that they are the focus of discussion, are recast as technical abilities themselves, or far too general to be useful in exams. The imaginative and critical abilities that lie at their core are typically left aside. Whether a nation is aspiring to a greater role in the world, or simply hopes for better peace, towards economic growth, towards job protection, like the US, these abilities look like useless paraphernalia. Curricular content has shifted, away from material that focuses on envisioning imagination and train- ing the mind into material that is directly relevant to preparation for tests. Along with the shift in content has come an even more banal shift in pedagogy away from teaching that seeks to promote questioning and individual responsibility towards force-feeding for good exam results.

The Obama administration has a chance to change the current modus operandi, promoting a richer concep- tion of education and a richer, more qualitative conceptions of testing. Presi- dent Obama's own personal values would seem to lead towards supporting such changes: he is famous for his interest in hear- ing and sifting the arguments on all sides of an issue, and he declares his great interest in "empathy" as a characteristic pertinent to an office as high as that of Justice of the US Supreme Court. In his speeches on education, the President righty emphasizes the importance of equality, talking about the importance of making all Americans capable of pursuing "the American dream". But the pursuit of this dream requires dreamers: educated minds who can think critically about alternatives and imag- ine large goals — preferably not just the goals of personal advancement, but also the goals involving human dignity and demo- cratic development. President Obama has so far focused, however, on individual income and national economic progress, arguing that the sort of education we need is the sort that serves those two goals. Even more problemat- ically, he repeatedly praises nations of the Far East which, in his view, have advanced beyond us in technology and science educa- tion. And he praises such nations in an omi- nous manner: "They are spending less time teaching things that don't matter, and more time teaching things that do." A life of rich significance and respectful, attentive citizenship is nowhere mentioned among the goals worth spending time on. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these things that "don't matter" include many of the things that this essay has described as essential for a democratic society.

President Obama has shown a willingness to rethink the nature and content of national testing. Let us hope that this rethinking continues and develops.

During the era in which people began to demand democratic self-government, educa- tion as a requirement of citizenship was con- fron- the sort of student that could function well in this demanding form of government: not's cultivated gentleman, stuffed with the wisdom of the ages, but an active, critical, reflective, and empathetic member of a community of equals, capable of exchanging ideas on a basis of respect and understanding with people from many different back- grounds. Today we maintain that like democracy and self-government, and we also think that we like freedom of speech, respect for difference, and understanding of others. We give these values lip service, but we think far too much in terms of the American view of order to transmit them to the next generation and ensure their survival.

This is an edited extract from Martha C. Nuss- baum's forthcoming book Not For Profit: Why democracy needs the humanities.

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