

**UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER**

European Liberal Education 1990-2015:  
a Critical Exploration of Commonality  
in the Visions of Eight First Leaders

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for a postgraduate research degree of the University of Winchester.

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# UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

## ABSTRACT

European Liberal Education 1990-2015:  
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This dissertation asks whether existing forms of liberal arts education in contemporary Europe are based on a common vision and whether there is justification in calling them a movement.

Nearly a hundred programmes and institutions created over the last three decades in several European countries now claim to offer a liberal arts education. However, their organizational forms, features and functions mentioned in the literature, and even the tradition of liberal education itself do not suggest a common vision of what that might entail. This thesis asks whether European liberal education should be viewed as a movement, a countermovement, a complex structure of core and fringes, or whether it is a misnomer.

The answer is sought in an exploratory collective case study of the visions of eight first leaders of such developments in eight European countries. The study generated original qualitative interview data regarding the theory, practice, and background of pioneering visions for liberal education. The data was analysed using sociological research methods, allowing comparisons between each case in order to determine the scope of overlap between each leader's vision.

I propose that European liberal education can be perceived as a countermovement to the dominant logic of the disciplinary research university. This countermovement is animated by divergent interpretations of the three heterogeneous themes: ontological complexity, transformational pedagogy, and organisational alternative.

This answer contributes to education studies research, providing an empirically grounded account of the visions behind important manifestations of European liberal education. It establishes an agenda for further explanatory, evaluative, comparative research on liberal education in Europe and beyond. The thesis also offers conjectures regarding the philosophical embeddedness of the framing of the question and the proposed answers in terms of multiple possible ontologies of European liberal education. Finally, this work addresses the importance of conceptual delineations for future practice and strategic choices ahead for liberal educators in Europe.

Keywords: Eastern Europe, Western Europe, academic leadership, liberal arts and sciences, interdisciplinarity, comparative research, higher education



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## PREFACE

The roots of this investigation go back to May 2009 when I studied at the University of Warsaw and attended the launch of its 'Collegium Artes Liberales'. The event attracted a range of speakers from public and private American liberal arts colleges and universities, as well as purportedly related academic initiatives from the Netherlands, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, and Poland. Attendees of all ages and academic provenances discussed the concept, history, and practice of liberal arts education, all in English. Two things seemed evident to me back then: (1) the speakers used the term 'liberal arts' and its derivatives in a range of different meanings; (2) they seemed uninterested of clarifying those differences.

This limited appetite for clarification and conceptual debate surprised me, especially given an academic setting. Some uses of the concept were clearly contradictory. Responding to a dean from Brown University who praised their 'free elective curriculum' model, the director of an honours programme at Boston College hailed the universal importance of the traditional Western literary canon for any undergraduate studies. Some of the other speakers appeared to simply speak past each other, one camp pondering the structures and systemic issues while another delved into, broadly conceived, the student experience. Most Americans and few Dutch speakers understood liberal education as only applicable to teaching, while the Eastern Europeans viewed it as an all-encompassing paradigm for the autonomous research university of tomorrow.

Discussions were illuminating in their ability to portray liberal education from many angles. But to me, they also revealed something of a confusion or possibly a disagreement about what liberal education actually was.

This mattered as, together with a few fellow 'MISH College' students, I had just signed up for a Bachelor branded as such. For the two previous years, I was simply captivated by the freedom of what, where, and when to study, in a programme that was widely considered prestigious because it was selective; little had I known it was referred to as liberal education, too. My only real concern was why this education was only offered to 'we few, we happy few, we band of brothers'.

'Collegium Artes Liberales' was more visibly experimental, its outcomes less predictable, and the concept of 'liberal education' impossible to ignore. The promised smorgasbord of ambitious, original courses delivered by dedicated teachers convinced about a dozen MISH students like me to sign up for the 'BA in Artes Liberales'. We could only defend this choice if we understood the concept. To that end we even created an English-Polish dictionary of the key terms in American liberal arts education. And then this conference happened.

Over the next few years, I conducted interviews in the US, the Netherlands, Russia, and across Poland to explore conceptualisations of 'liberal arts education' among its self-proclaimed practitioners. Almost all of them passionately advocated their preferred interpretations, often significantly more creative than those I had encountered in the literature. From those conversations I concluded that there exists a plurality of interpretations of liberal education – but I still did not understand why practitioners did not simply acknowledge that and proceed to map the differences. Furthermore, I saw no clear common authority behind the restoration of liberal arts degrees in Europe, be it a common masterplan, leader, or source of funding. The self-proclaimed liberal arts programmes that I had studied seemed idiosyncratic in their attempts to negotiate the historical tradition, contemporary American practice, and local conditions. Perhaps not coincidentally, each programme coalesced around a charismatic academic figure whom, given their impact and their gender, I began to think of as a 'founding father'. In a sense, this investigation arose from an Emersonian premise that 'Every institution is a shadow of one man'.

I appreciated those first leaders persevered in advancing an elusive concept that, for most European audiences, had been and remains confusing. I was fond of the individual effectiveness and imagination. The question was how to marry the two. Had the first leaders lived 'parallel lives' in respect to common external conditions or common inner drives? At first, this dissertation was supposed to more prescriptively to study the aims, principles, and values of the first leaders. Later, the goal was revised as an inductive reconstruction of the intentions their applications of the concept of liberal education.

Here is the crux of the problem: if the first leaders wanted the same thing, they had not communicated well enough in the literature and to the general public what that thing was. Conversely, if they wanted different things, it was not clear how their divergent intentions related to their ambiguous and abstract generalisations of the concept. In either case it was not clear why all of them took all the trouble to use the long-forgotten idea of liberal education in the contemporary European setting. Only based on those answers we could revisit the question whether European liberal education should be viewed as a movement.

It would not be possible to do such a study without the cooperation of the first leaders. Fortunately, they all agreed to be interviewed. This thesis reports on the study that ensued.

## CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION: THE CHALLENGE OF EUROPEAN LIBERAL EDUCATION

Only the past dozen years have engaged glimmers of new life within the region that gave birth to the liberal arts. A prominent example is the Netherlands (...) Poland has now an active and successful liberal education **movement** (...) which has grown steadily in prestige (...) [Polish liberal education now] exists alongside curricula left over from the Soviet era.

I think there's a **movement** out there, (...) There are a lot of initiatives that are popping up here and here. I think that so far there is a lack of coordination and a lack of awareness largely that this is happening.

The idea is that I will be some kind of ambassador for Liberal Arts, and write and lecture about why Liberal Arts matters, for democracy, for the labour market, but mainly for living a good life, so that the world gets a better understanding of what the Liberal Arts **movement** is all about.<sup>1</sup>

Within the last decade, at least three noted scholars have stated that there is Liberal Arts movement in Europe. But what is this movement based upon or what does it fight for? There seems to be no question that there are people and institutions who claim to do liberal arts in Europe. But it is far from clear what exactly do they claim to be doing and whether this adds up to a common cause that is normally included in definitions of movement.

This dissertation offers an empirically grounded study of the idea of European liberal arts and draws inspiration from philosophy, sociology, and education studies. Its aim is to better determine the shared meaning of the phrase 'liberal arts in (contemporary) Europe' or to map the existing scope of diversity. The rest of this chapter covers the key terms, the background, and the problem from which this study arose.

For the purposes of this study, European liberal education (hereafter ELE) refers to all higher education developments which use the name 'liberal arts' or 'liberal education' (or some version of those terms, in English or in translation) located in geographical Europe. Since the contested nature of the concept provides no common and agreed definition, this broadly understood principle of self-description is for all its flaws the best criterion available. For the same reason, throughout the thesis, 'liberal arts', 'liberal education', and terms related to

<sup>1</sup> Sources: (Peterson, 2011); Susan H. Gillespie, interviewed for *The Liberal Arts, Abroad* by Elizabeth Redden, February 16, 2009, Inside Higher Ed (Redden, 2019); (Teun Dekker, interviewed on the occasion of his professorial appointment for the Maastricht University blog, (Dekker, 2017a). Emphasis mine.

them are used interchangeably. Scholars have counted ELEs as part of a global trend for more liberal arts and attempted to quantify it.<sup>2</sup>

In Europe, one can identify about a hundred diverse developments:<sup>3</sup> 13 American Universities (excluded from this study),<sup>4</sup> and about 84 programmes and institutions located in 18 European countries (the dataset of ELEs included in Appendix 2 will be discussed in more details in section 2.1). More than 10.000 alumni graduated from those programs over the past three decades, and more than 5000 first year students started in 2018-19 alone (ELAI data). Most ELEs only offer bachelor's degree courses delivered under a broad range of organisational arrangements. With further growth in ELE, the range of interpretations of the underlying concept is likely to increase further.

This terminological and operational difficulty in delineating liberal education stems from the divergent contexts of past uses of the phrase. The most popular interpretation of 'liberal arts' today refers to the liberal arts college, as a special type of US undergraduate higher education institution with a curriculum focussed on the liberal arts disciplines, a residential non-urban campus, and typically private ownership structure. Notably, the global rise of liberal arts over the past three decades coincided with the short period of uncontested American hegemony. During that period, in a geographically limited and increasingly connected European higher education space many countries have witnessed the introduction of ELEs. Their underlying curricular and pedagogical philosophy was largely foreign to their traditions. Scholars have suggested ELEs might serve as evidence of increased convergence between the European and American higher education. All of this points to the assumed existence of some common vision of ELE guiding those developments despite the clear differences in curricula, organisational features, pedagogy etc.

<sup>2</sup> No study has applied a common criterion to study liberal arts education as a global phenomenon, but one approximate total number is 1550 LA colleges and/or programmes across 54 countries. Of those, 1350 are in the US (2018, AAC&U listed institutions, <https://secure.aacu.org/iMIS/AACUR/Membership/MemberListAACU.aspx>). Alternative, more focussed criteria used in Carnegie 2018 'Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus' on the other hand provide only 241 US liberal arts institutions, see: Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research (2018). *Carnegie Classifications 2018 public data file*, <http://carnegieclassifications.iu.edu/downloads/CCIHE2018-PublicDataFile.xlsx> <21.06.2019>. What is understood as a liberal arts education changed as well: the recent replication of Breneman's (1994) methodology saw a decline from 212 to 130 between 1990 and 2012 (Baker et al., 2012). Outside the US and Europe, liberal education refers to 120 programmes or institutions in 35 countries (based on GGLEI, Godwin (2013) data, minus liberal arts organizations and European programmes listed).

<sup>3</sup> According to European Liberal Arts Initiative database, hereafter ELAI, [www.liberal-arts.eu](http://www.liberal-arts.eu) (Hoff and Kontowski, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> The reason is because they are European in location, but operate as part of the US higher education, and therefore are hardly ELE; for a discussion, see: (Long, 2017). Scholars did not suggest a clear connection between the existence of liberal education and the rise of ELE.

Unlike the rest of global liberal arts, ELEs have also had direct predecessors in use of the phrase. For a long period in European history, 'liberal arts' was clearly defined as a prescriptive curriculum of all of Europe's medieval universities that included the seven *artes liberales* (Zimmermann, 2013) in the form of trivium (grammar, logic, rhetoric) and quadrivium (music, astronomy, arithmetic, geometry). Despite the work of scholars tracking the synchronic and diachronic variation in how liberal arts education was understood and practiced over time (Kimball, 1995; Rothblatt, 2003), the dominant way of addressing ELE still refers to this perceived unity and/or consensus. The disappearance of the focus on (seven) liberal arts from European higher education by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century tells us however to see the current development as not continuation but a reintroduction under new conditions and without the medieval conceptual coherence. If the meaning of the concept to at least some extent derives from the uses people make of the words associated with this concept, to know what ELE means today, one needs to engage in some form of an empirical study of its current uses.

Liberal arts have a history of continuation in the US, especially in dedicated liberal arts colleges seen as 'distinctively American' (Koblik and Graubard, 2000). Thriving in the more elite past, all but the few of them are either struggling, merging, or nearing extinction (Baker et al., 2012; Breneman, 1994). Despite this, few have abandoned the phrase 'liberal arts', which explains the significant pluralism and dynamism of liberal education in the US. Recently, promoters of liberal education attempted to clear the possible confusion by producing positive or negative definitions of the core concept.

Positive definitions portray liberal arts as education in disciplines spanning the arts, humanities, theoretical social sciences, and often some of the natural sciences. The list of liberal arts disciplines changed from antiquity, to the middle ages, to modern times, and especially from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Yacek and Kimball, 2017). A related argument might be that what distinguishes liberal arts education is a curriculum of breadth, depth, and choice (Grant and Riesman, 1978). This way of addressing liberal arts is deceptively attractive. It is easy to forget that the liberal arts curriculum was almost fully prescribed until the reforms of Charles W. Elliot at Harvard at the turn of the century; that some prominent liberal arts institutions in the 'great books' tradition still do not follow this model, and finally such curricular criterion almost equates liberal arts and any standard undergraduate education in the US.

This ambiguity about liberal arts education fuelled attempts to at least define what it is not. Some define liberal education as not professional, in tension with the medieval reality where liberal arts offered the only entry into the three most prestigious professions (law, theology, medicine), as well as the current reality where professional, or pre-professional, programmes

are offered by many liberal arts institutions (Rothblatt, 2003). Another type of a negative definition says that liberal arts is not a specialist training, even though the disciplinary logic of majors and departments rules in most curricula and the generalist ethos is at best an afterthought (Kimball, 1995). Finally, liberal arts are said to not be practical or readily applicable for career advancement, even though they are increasingly portrayed in this way to the sceptical parents, while liberal arts pedagogies praise hands-on experience, problem-solving, an immersion in the global challenges, supporting the thought that all education is in a way practical (Rothblatt, 2003).

In the US specifically, liberal arts advocates additionally face the accusation equating this form of education with ideological training in political liberalism. They typically denounce this interpretation of liberalism as a later, unconnected meaning of 'liberal', and highlight the ancient meaning of education appropriate for free people, meaning citizens. More problematically, however, certain political sympathies and higher income brackets are more represented on their campuses. But one should not be forgetful about the religious colleges or neohumanist 'great books' institutions whose interpretation of liberal arts is hardly 'liberal' and yet they are not really denounced as impostors.

Positive, negative, and political definitions of liberal education do not offer an agreed common core meaning of the term. These contestations show that liberal education matters to many groups of people who seem to use it with a range of definitions to achieve a range of aims. Such proliferation of meaning puts the term at risk of becoming a misnomer.

Against this complex conceptual backdrop, the rise of ELE can be seen through many lenses: historical European, contemporary American, as part of a global trend, but also from an indigenous perspective that might view it from at least two perspectives. One can see ELE as an emergent, coherent, Europe-wide alternative to the dominant forms of university education, or as a set of grassroots developments that all use the same concept without any substantial connection between them. Furthermore, those interpretations are partial and not exclusive: one could use one of those lenses, some mix some of them, all of them, or none.

The lens applied in this study is an indigenous one, aiming for a better understanding of ELE as much as possible on its own terms. The study will generate evidence that would allow for answer to the following research question:

Do ELEs share some kind of a vision of what a liberal education is, suggestive of some kind of pan-European movement; or, is this a series of unconnected developments alighting on a common name but sharing no kind of common vision or concept of liberal education?

The core concept of this study, a vision, should for now be broadly understood as a central understanding of the nature of ELE stemming not from the results of ELE programmes but from the intentions of those who speak for it. Section 3.1.1. offers a more detailed conceptual elaboration, based on which the binary research question will be translated into four specific models of the study: ELE as a movement, a misnomer, a combination of core and fringes, or a countermovement.

The central question of a common vision can be seen in terms of unity and diversity. ELE currently seems to be a confused concept offering us no canonical interpretation giving a convincing account of a unified vision, but also no meaningful, research-based account of the existing diversity of visions according to the patterns and trends. Part of the explanation for this scholarly oversight might be that previously ELE was discussed as part of, or a case of something larger.<sup>5</sup> This study will put it centre stage, by consequently treating it as a dependent variable and building a new research angle that would compare the properties of selected influential manifestations of ELE to address the question of a common vision. The ambition of this study is to offer a meaningful snapshot of ELE: taken from an observer's perspective, limited in scope but dense in content, taken in order to account for a vision but nevertheless capturing more than that about the protagonists and the background of their work.

The contribution of this study lies in generating and analysing new empirical data to answer the research question concerning the common vision behind ELE or lack thereof. The primary data source are interviews with eight academics who were first to direct an ELE in their country (hereafter 'first leaders') within the past three decades: Hans Adriaansens (Netherlands), Nikolay Kuposov (Russia), Nigel Tubbs (England), Thomas Nørgaard (Germany), Anatoly Mikhailov (Belarus), Jerzy Axer (Poland), Samuel Abrahám (Slovakia) and Leif Borgert (Sweden). The exploratory character of this research is evident in the focus on the 'what' question rather than the 'why' question which could only come at a more advanced stage. This collective case study covers primarily opinions about the theory, practice, and contexts of ELE, used to reconstruct the visions of first leaders. Chapter Three will offer a more elaborated account of the methodology of this study.

The study extends the scholarship of ELE by providing new and systematic data about the visions of the first leaders and by analysing those visions to answer the research question. Philosophers of liberal education may interpret the answers provided here in a range of ways

<sup>5</sup> For example higher education systems dynamics (van der Wende, 2011), a global rise of liberal education (Boyle, 2019; Godwin, 2013; Peterson, 2012a), or a democratic transformation after the end of Cold War (Farnham, 1999; Gillespie, 2001).

to reflect on the nature of this argument and its embeddedness in various ontologies of ELE. Practitioners of ELE may benefit from an informed insight into an interpretation of the common vision of ELE offered here, which might inform strategic decisions within their programmes as well as equip them to innovate using a more elaborate palette of coherent visions of ELE.

The proposition of this thesis is that a common vision of ELE can be reconstructed using the three themes emerging from the stated intentions of each leader: ontological (and epistemological) diversity, transformational pedagogy, and an organisational alternative. I argue that ELE is a countermovement to the dominant mode of higher education based on a common but mediated vision created by these three heterogeneous themes. This vision is constructed from both the negative identity of self-declared resistance and the positive identity of offering a superior alternative driven by the three themes. The unity of the three themes and the diversity of the specific intentions of each leader jointly make up the common vision. The heterogeneous character of this vision explains the observed diversity of features and functions of existing forms of ELE.

In Chapter Two, I start by classifying existing understandings of ELE to argue that a common vision neither arises from, nor is definitively excluded by the organisational landscape, scholarly literature on the topic, or historical summaries of liberal education. I go on to argue that this opens the possibility for either a philosophical or a sociological study of ELE. I make the case for choosing the latter. In Chapter Three, I outline the theoretical framework and the main methodological choices made in designing the empirical study of the eight first leaders of ELE. In Chapter Four, I present a structured account of the results of the study in the spirit of 'an imagined conversation' between the first leaders interviewed for this project. In Chapter Five, I first analyse the results by comparing and contrasting the individual visions, then I propose the three themes of ontological complexity, transformative pedagogy, and organisational alternative as constituting a common vision of ELE among the leaders. I discuss how those themes would operate and go on to make the case for understanding ELE as a countermovement. In the concluding Chapter Six, I elaborate on the contribution of this thesis, explore promising avenues for further research, and offer conjectures about the potential significance of the outcomes of this study for future research and for the philosophy and practice of ELE. In the Afterword I return to a reflection on my own position as a researcher within the study.

## CHAPTER TWO. CONTEXTS OF EUROPEAN LIBERAL EDUCATION

This chapter searches for a common vision of ELE in the existing state of knowledge proceeding from the most concrete and tangible towards increasingly general and abstract understandings. I first review the organisational landscape of ELE, then discursive work on ELE through the lens of proposed features and functions, and finally the paradigmatic examples of liberal education, primarily in the historical uses of the concept. I will argue that at none of those levels a common or a dominant interpretation of the core concept arises. This means that the problem of a common vision has yet to be solved, and I present two ways to that: philosophical interpretation of arguments and empirical study of influential understandings. The concluding section offers rationale for choosing the latter for the empirical study discussed in Chapter Three.

### 2.1. ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT

There is no formal definition of ELE, enforced through accreditation or policy measures across Europe. Only a minority of the existing ELEs are accredited in the US or are otherwise formally connected to American liberal education institutions. Without a legal/normative criterion, ELE refers to institutions claiming to offer one or listed as such by someone else.

Before this study began, at least five registries of ELE have been compiled in the last two decades. Two by organisations promoting liberal education in Europe (Artes Liberales, 1997; ECOLAS, 2008), one extensive list of both European and global forms of liberal education prepared by an ELE programme (Modern Liberal Arts programme, 2010), and two by higher education researchers (Godwin, 2013; van der Wende, 2011). Of those lists only Godwin revealed the criteria used to prepare her list which included 57 ELEs in Europe. According to Godwin's Global Liberal Education Inventory (GLEI), an ELE institution would either match a set of three broad criteria (discussed further in section 2.2.2) – or self-describe as a liberal arts programme/institution.<sup>6</sup> GLEI was last updated in 2013, and thus was not ideal for this study.<sup>7</sup>

The ELAI database was created to offer an up-to-date picture that addresses some of the most visible shortcomings of GLEI (Hoff and Kontowski, 2017). Its only inclusion criterion was self-description in the language of liberal arts; listed institutions asked to confirm their entries; the

<sup>6</sup> GLEI does not reveal which institution was included based on which criterion (normative or self-descriptive). The imprecise language of 'affiliation' (with a European university) or US accreditation rather than organizational types are further methodological limitations of GLEI.

<sup>7</sup> Additionally, GLEI contained factual errors in descriptions of some Eastern European ELEs and omitted some self-describing ELEs elsewhere.

database is public, continuously updated, and based on a clear methodology. For all those reasons ELAI was chosen as the baseline for this study.

As of May 2019, the full ELAI database includes 158 entries related to existing, former, questionable,<sup>8</sup> and planned developments using the self-description of liberal arts in any language in the geographical Europe or being referred to as such by their leader. According to the methodological description of ELAI, and only including the existing ELEs, the institutions fell into six types (the May 2019 entry counts in brackets):

- Private independent liberal arts institutions (1.a) – an independent small size European college / university; normally awarding a degree in liberal arts; private (3 entries).
- Private American institutions (1.b) – an institution operating according to American ideas and organisational models, even if not a branch; located in major cities throughout the continent; private (13 entries).
- Public University Colleges (2.a) – a University College offering B.A./B.Sc. in liberal arts; offered by financially and functionally autonomous units ( ‘ colleges ’ ), with public universities accrediting the programme (mostly NL) (15 entries).
- Public liberal arts programmes (2.b) -- B.A./B.Sc. in liberal arts, offered by an established public university, where the liberal arts programme of study is one among other (disciplinary degree) programmes (mostly UK) (32 entries).
- Liberal arts inspired curricular innovations (3.a) – an institution promoting curricular innovations (core curriculum, elective principle, academic skills etc.) directly inspired by liberal arts ideals; offered within ‘regular’ university degree structures or faculties; public or private (34 entries).
- Organisations and associations promoting liberal arts in Europe (and beyond) (3.b) (11 entries).<sup>9</sup>

3.b and 1.b entries were excluded from this study. The first one because network definitions of ELE should not distort the picture arising from the institutions offering ELE themselves;<sup>10</sup> the latter since they preceded the rise of ELEs post 1989, and their operation is of little connection to any European higher education system. Majority of the remaining entries are degree-

<sup>8</sup> This category includes institutions or programmes mentioned on other lists of ELE that do not use the language of ELE.

<sup>9</sup> The source for the above descriptions (<https://liberal-arts.eu/database-methodology/>) contains also more details and the methodology of ELAI database.

<sup>10</sup> None of those official and unofficial organisations is currently a major advocate, a forum for a debate, or comprehensive collaboration between ELEs. Two most active networks are ECOLAS (pan-European, est. 2007, 24 member institutions) and UCDN (the Netherlands, est. 2014, 7 members -- all university colleges).

granting institutions (typically BA or BSc), mostly public programmes. 84 remaining ELE institutions and programmes contain a population referred to here (See Appendix 2).

The different institutional types of ELAI-listed institutions suggest different organisational principles and conditions of operation for ELE: a self-standing college, a university college, a separate course at a research university, and a mode of studying suggest different visions of desirable and possible interpretations of the core concept. Furthermore, each of those categories is internally diverse, partially due to different legal (national) and socio-institutional frameworks in which ELEs are embedded.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, the principle of self-description is difficult to apply with full consistency: ‘liberal arts’, ‘liberal arts and sciences’, ‘liberal education’ are three most popular names used for ELEs in English; but over 30 programmes do not teach in English and their ways of referring to their education is not always a direct translation of those English names.<sup>12</sup>

Those complexities of organisational landscape provide little of substance that unites institutions declaring themselves to be ELE. Given the three factors above, no common vision can be said to directly emerge from the institutional practice of existing ELE.

## **2.2. ANALYTICAL CONTEXT**

### **2.2.1. ANALYTICAL WORKS – AN OVERVIEW**

A growing body of analytical works on ELE were written by scholars, practitioners, and advocates of ELE. In introducing this new phenomenon, they typically attempted to offer an interpretation of the commonalities between different organisational forms of ELE and as such provide a common vision. This section provides a general overview of this type of relevant literature, before the next two sections will compare features and functions of ELE claimed by their authors.

#### Past approaches to ELE

The term ‘liberal education’ was (most likely) first mentioned in association with post-1989 European education by Peter Darvas (1995). Reviewing new developments in higher education

<sup>11</sup> At times those differences complicate the process of classification into a category and require a judgement call. This is especially difficult with relation to institutional change, for example, at what point one institution is no longer the same, and how to classify an institution that moved between categories over time.

<sup>12</sup> A further complication arises from the educational concepts that cut across organizational categories (for example, problem-based pedagogy, used by some 2a and 2b institutions) and are by no means exclusive to ELE.

in Central and Eastern Europe, Darvas used the term referring to a bachelor's degree at the Institute of Fundamental Studies of the Charles University in Prague. Subsequent definitions of ELE were coming from US liberal educators involved in and supporting the emerging 'galaxy of liberal education prototypes and models' (Farnham, 1999, p. 9) across the region (Artes Liberales, 1997; Becker, 2014; Gillespie, 2001). The authors were primarily concerned with introducing and promoting the philosophy of liberal education among the existing institutions. They wrote primarily for other liberal educators – American and European, current and prospective. This early literature declared rather than researched general or distinguishing features of ELE and discussed at length some practical arrangements required for liberal arts programmes.

Concurrently, international higher education scholars elevated 'liberal or general education' to the policy solutions for the 21st century and of special importance for the developing countries (Task Force on Higher Education and Society, 2000). In the joint UNESCO and the World Bank report, authors admitted that their proposal to spread liberal education was 'unusual or controversial' given the popularity of STEM disciplines and the dominant market logic. They argued, however, that liberal education enhances long-term socio-economic prospects of a developing country as it progresses towards a knowledge economy. Contributing to the workforce development by providing the adaptable generalists who know how to learn and can 'manage and assimilate greatly expanded quantities of information' (2000, p. 83), liberal education is simply useful. The communication and methodological skills, a broad cultural base, and ethical awareness distinguish a liberally educated person who nevertheless possesses 'depth in some field of knowledge' (2000, p. 84). This vision of liberal education could be provided in a flexible geometry of general education curriculum for intellectually oriented students, a general education component for non-liberal education students, or a basic grounding for all students in higher education (2000, p. 87).

A decade later, liberal education was even called a 'small trend' in the double role of economic and socio-ethical innovation (Altbach et al., 2009). On the global scale, liberal education (or liberal learning) was said to emphasise a broad interdisciplinary curriculum focussed on creativity, critical thinking, cultural awareness, problem solving, and communication skills. In Eastern Europe and other developing countries, it was 'considered as a means for developing a critical and participatory citizenry' that is 'creative, adaptable, and able to give broad ethical consideration to social advances' (2009, pp. 115–116).

Western Europe entered the analytical works on ELE only in the early 2010s (van der Wende, 2011). This empirical research focussed on the structural considerations affecting or affected by the rise of ELE. Higher education scholars (Godwin and Altbach, 2016) and later sociologists

(Telling, 2018) attempted to understand the patterns and trends of ELE development in a methodologically valid, comparative, and mostly quantitative way.

Most recently there was a more pronounced interest in ELE from a more philosophical angle which described or prescribed the common elements of ELE that unite the common concept beyond diverse institutional arrangements (Torralba, 2017; Tubbs, 2015). Their interest in the history and theory was rooted in the principal focus on contemporary European manifestations they wished to understand and often improve or strengthen.

#### Analytical works of ELE today

This varied subject literature either discussed ELE as part of a wider (typically global) trend or focussed entirely on ELE. Works of the latter type multiplied post 2010s. Focussing from now solely on the scholarly and policy works, I catalogued them in Appendix 1 according to scope, format, and approach/methodology. In more than one case, coding a particular work required a judgment call with relation to which category it first best.

The analysis for this chapter was closed after including all the works I was aware of by October 2018. At least three relevant works appeared since then: one from advocacy (Schwartz-Leeper, 2018), one outlining the conceptual framework of an ongoing empirical study (Dekker, 2019), and two discussing the global development of liberal education from a systematic theoretical (Boyle, 2019) and practical case study perspective (Nishimura and Sasao, 2019). Because those works add new perspectives complicating the existing visions of ELE even further, including them would not have changed the outcome of the review.

This overview only lists the works published in English. Despite the changes in publication patterns, there could well be equally or perhaps even more relevant publications discussing ELE programmes in other languages that this study will not cover. Perhaps some of the ELE practitioners who appear to not have published much about their innovations in English simply did so in their own languages. But since no reliable catalogue of those relevant works exists, especially from the 1990s in Eastern Europe, it is impossible to determine the scope and value of such studies for the understanding of a common vision of ELE. At the same time, it might be assumed that an author writing with a clear comparative ambition wishing to reach other scholars would consider writing in English. Still, language remains a limitation of this overview.

Institutional communication (websites, social media, curricula, promotional materials, mission statements etc.) and media reports discussing ELE were also not included, even though they are probably the most widely accessed sources of information about ELE. As such, they might have not just shaped the perception of the phenomenon but also the phenomenon itself. But

since this study is concerned with the vision, which might be different from the institutional and journalistic presentations of this vision, impartiality would call to include all or none, and I chose the latter given the abundance of scholarly publications. Those works likely influenced the self-perception and practices within ELE too, but were judged against a higher standard of argument, objectivity, and critical engagement with the inherited theorizations. Of course, scholarly character, typically determined by the place of publication, is only an imperfect approximation of higher quality of the claims; this is especially relevant where the authors of scholarship are also involved in those and similar developments as administrators or consultants.

The remaining scholarly works in English are products of different contexts of creation and produced for different intended audiences. ELE as such is rarely discussed in detail: few peer-reviewed works of comparative character are available, whether theoretical or empirical, with the most attention being placed at either global liberal education or at the level of case studies. Overall, this literature offers limited critical engagement with each other's claims, framing ELE as a new phenomenon requiring introduction rather than cross-examination. This emerging field of studies on ELE does not yet have clear disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological characteristics.<sup>13</sup> As noted by Godwin on the global scale (Godwin, 2015a), the dominant narrative on ELE is upbeat about its state and prospects. Both the unifying content or the common counter-forces facing ELE are rarely discussed (Peterson, 2012a). For those reasons no agreed common vision of ELE can be said to immediately emerge from the subject literature.

### Selecting core analytical works

Searching for a mediated common vision in the works listed in Appendix 1, I selected 23 major contributions from 14 authors for a closer analysis that would offer a vector map of the overlaps and divergences in the theory of ELE. Seeking a feasible comparison of influential works, I decided to focus on the scholarly literature (empirical or conceptual) and the works of advocacy as long as they had a clear general and/or comparative ambition. ELE advocates included in this study represented a whole network of institutions, hopefully reducing their bias towards any particular institution, and making them well informed about what is happening. Case studies and narratives coming from administrators, teachers, and students were excluded at this stage.

<sup>13</sup> For example, only one study appeared to have a solid empirical basis and compelling methodology (Telling, 2018) [except for the UCDN survey (*Liberal Arts & Sciences Programmes Alumni Survey Factsheet 2017, 2018*)]; none of the studies included fieldwork (even those classified as empirical); just one short study seriously engaged with the institutional diversity of ELE (Balli, 2017).

Studies belonging to the history and philosophy of liberal arts education, especially as related to the US practice, were excluded at this stage as well.<sup>14</sup> They were judged to offer a perspective on the past or the ideal state of ELE rather than making claims about what ELE currently is. Excluding those works might also limit the confirmation bias of reading too much of the past ideas into contemporary developments. The role of philosophical literature for this study will be further discussed in section 2.4.

The 23 works selected for a discussion in the remainder of this chapter have been listed in the Table 1 below. They constitute analytical works on ELE in the narrow sense used in this chapter.

*Table 1. Works on ELE selected for a closer analysis*

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| Advocacy<br>(Farnham, 1999)              | Empirical scholarly<br>(Peterson, 2012a)                                       | Conceptual scholarly<br>(Dekker, 2017b) also (Dekker, 2017c, 2017d) |
| (Becker, 2014)                           | (van der Wende, 2011) also<br>(van der Wende, 2017, 2012, 2013)                | (Dirksen, 2017)   |
| (University College Deans Network, 2014) | (Godwin, 2013)<br>also (Godwin, 2015a, 2017a, 2017b; Godwin and Altbach, 2016) | (Torralba, 2017)  |
| (Boetsch, 2017)                          | (Telling, 2018)  | (Mikhailov, 2009)   |
|  | (Dahrendorf, 2000)   | (Ivanova and Sokolov, 2015)   |

### Comparative framework for claims about ELE

This sample was a feasible selection of the relevant studies of ELE that I subjected to a version of thematic analysis (Kuckartz, 2014), appropriately so for a maturing field of knowledge production. The reading of this literature was driven by a question of how they describe the concept of ELE. Through a considerate yet not uncritical appraisal of those studies, I coded the theoretical understandings of ELE in each of them, sometimes expanding towards other works of the same author. I noted that conceptualisations of ELE follow one of the two strategies for understanding ELE through the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ question, or a static and a dynamic dimension.

The static dimension of ELE considers the features of an ELE institution (or programme) or an ELE-related individual (student, alumnus, prospective student) that distinguishes them from non-ELE counterparts. The dynamic interpretation is concerned with the functions of ELE, understood as reasons it developed, survived, or remains needed today and in the future. The latter category merges causal explanations and rhetorical arguments because they are not

<sup>14</sup> The philosophical literature on or connected to ELE is extremely limited.

clearly distinguished in the literature. While static understandings were proposed at the European level, the dynamic understandings were posed with regards to any of the three: Eastern Europe, Western Europe, or the whole of Europe. This framework was elaborated in Table 2 below.

*Table 2. Framework for analysing the selected works on ELE*

|  |  |   |   |                 |
|--|--|---|---|-----------------|
| Review of:                                       | Conceptualisations of ELE  |   |   |                 |
| By classifying                                   | Understandings into categories into dimensions                                       |   |   |                 |
|  |  | <--   | <--                                     | <--             |
| DIMENSIONS                                       |  | MAIN CATEGORIES   | SUBCATEGORIES                           | UNDERSTANDINGS  |
| Perspective / dimension / level of understanding | Answering the question   | That can be classified into   | Fall into that many distinct categories | Claims coded as |
| static   | What is ELE in itself, what makes it not something else?                             | Individual features;<br>Institutional features                      | 45                                      | Features        |
| dynamic  | Why did ELE appear/survive/grow in European HE systems (in reality, or in rhetoric)? | Educational functions;<br>systemic functions;<br>external functions | 25                                      | functions       |

This analytical framework was applied to search for a common vision of ELE in the features and functions proposed in the literature; analytical procedures will be discussed in the appropriate subsections.

### 2.2.2. FEATURES

Godwin’s definition of liberal education, used as a criterion for GLEI, remains the most thorough attempt to understand ELE according to distinguishing features. For Godwin, any form of liberal education (outside the US) has to either self-describe in the language of liberal education or meet the following three criteria of offering:

- (1) an interdisciplinary curriculum of the humanities, social sciences and science as well as
- (2) a general education protocol (some form of core curriculum) and
- (3) a focus on some general academic or transferable skills (Godwin, 2017b, p. 88), also known as ‘capacities of mind’ (Godwin, 2017a, p. 320).<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Those must include two of the following four: Transferable skills, Social responsibility, Global citizenship, or holistic student development.

Combining the breadth and depth of curriculum with generic learning outcomes, and claiming that both distinguish liberal education from others forms of higher education, remains a popular strategy to offer a common vision for ELE (for a discussion specifically on European scene, see a much longer but fundamentally similar example in Boetsch, 2017).

But a systematic review of 11 authors from advocacy, empirical, and conceptual research reveals a much more complex picture with a range of different and even contradictory attempts to define ELE through features. During the open coding, 69 of the original codes were partially merged where authors used different language to describe similar qualities. The remaining 45 distinct features were clustered into eight inductive subcategories falling into two main categories: institutional features of the programme/college/university and individual features to be instilled in a student who attends such institution. The results are presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Comparison of ELE features in the selected literature

|   |                 | advocacy   |        |      |         | empirical |       |        |         | conceptual |         |          |   |
|---|-----------------|--|--------|------|---------|-----------|-------|--------|---------|------------|---------|----------|---|
|   |                 | Farnham  | Becker | UCDN | Blaster | Peterson  | Wende | Godwin | Telling | Dekker     | Dirksen | Torralla |   |
| institutional features                              | curriculum      | interdisciplinary curriculum / breadth and depth       | X      | X    | X       | X         |       | X      | X       |            | X       |          |   |
|   |                 | general education protocol / core requirements         |        |      |         | X         | X     |        | X       |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | student choice / individualised / elective curriculum  | X      | X    | X       | X         |       |        |         |            | X       |          |   |
|   | pedagogy        | student centred teaching                               |        | X    |         | X         |       |        | X       |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | intensive pedagogy                                     |        |      | X       |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | undergraduate research                                 |        |      | X       |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | continuous assessment / evaluation                     |        |      |         | X         |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | text-based education                                   | X      | X    |         |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   | community       | tightly knit community / extracurriculars              |        |      | X       |           |       |        |         |            | X       |          | X |
|   |                 | faculty mentoring / advising                           |        |      | X       | X         |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | specific ethos   |        |      |         | X         |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | participatory governance                               |        |      | X       |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | international education                                | X      |      |         |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   | organisation    | based on tolerance                                     |        |      |         |           |       |        |         |            | X       | X        |   |
|   |                 | innovative education                                   |        |      | X       |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | alternative to departmental/specialist structure       |        |      |         |           | X     |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | a nexus of teaching and research                       | X      |      | X       |           | X     |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | selectivity (by merit or motivation)                   |        |      | X       |           |       | X      |         | X          |         |          |   |
|   | positional      | culture of excellence / superior performance           |        |      |         |           |       | X      |         |            | X       |          |   |
|   |                 | self-describes as liberal education                    |        |      |         |           |       |        | X       |            |         |          |   |
| navigates tradition and innovation of LA philosophy |                 |  |        |      |         |           |       |        | X       |            |         |          |   |
| offers instruction in English                       |                 |  |        | X    |         |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
| personal features                                   | intellectual    | presents itself as contributing to democracy           |        |      |         |           |       |        | X       |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | holistically developed / a whole person                |        |      |         | X         |       | X      | X       |            |         | X        |   |
|   |                 | general academic skills (learning, communicating)      |        | X    | X       | X         |       |        |         |            | X       |          |   |
|   |                 | recognises interdisciplinary connections               |        |      | X       |           |       | X      | X       |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | broadly educated / intellectually multi-dimensional    |        | X    | X       | X         |       |        |         |            | X       |          |   |
|   |                 | curious / lifelong learner                             | X      |      |         | X         |       |        |         |            |         |          | X |
|   |                 | imagination  | X      |      |         |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   | moral / ethical | education as an end in itself                          |        |      |         |           |       |        |         |            |         |          | X |
|   |                 | self-determined / autonomous                           |        |      |         |           |       |        |         |            |         | X        |   |
|   |                 | democratically engaged / common good                   |        | X    |         | X         |       |        | X       |            | X       | X        |   |
|   |                 | virtuous / morally developed                           |        |      |         |           |       |        |         |            |         |          | X |
|   |                 | critical thinking / critical intelligence              | X      | X    | X       | X         |       |        | X       |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | responsible / mature                                   |        |      |         | X         |       | X      |         |            | X       | X        |   |
|   |                 | sympathetic / tolerant                                 | X      |      | X       |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | judgement  | X      |      |         |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   | economic        | reflexivity  |        |      | X       |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   |                 | employable based on transferable / 21st century skills |        |      |         | X         |       | X      | X       | X          |         |          |   |
|   |                 | unique   |        |      |         |           |       |        |         | X          |         |          |   |
|   |                 | talented / exceptional on meritocratic grounds         |        |      |         |           |       |        |         | X          |         |          |   |
|   |                 | interculturally capable / globally aware               |        |      | X       |           |       | X      | X       |            |         |          |   |
| problem-solver                                      |                 |  |        |      | X       |           |       |        |         |            |         |          |   |
|   | flexible        |  |        |      |         |           |       |        | X       |            |         |          |   |
|   | innovative      |  |        |      |         |           |       |        | X       |            |         |          |   |

Based on (Becker, 2014; Boetsch, 2017; Dekker, 2017b; Dirksen, 2017; Farnham, 1999; Godwin, 2013; Peterson, 2012a; Telling, 2018; University College Deans Network, 2014; van der Wende, 2011).

## Description of the categories

Institutional features related to the curriculum, pedagogy, community, organisation of an ELE institution as well as the way it positions itself on the higher education market.

Curricular features covered 'breath, depth, and fixity' (Grant and Riesman, 1978, p. 356). The first two elements deal with the scope of an interdisciplinary or multi-disciplinary curriculum. In terms of fixed character, some of the works suggested a need for core requirements for all students also referred to as a 'general education protocol', while other works underlined the need for student choice and ability to carve their own path.<sup>16</sup>

Pedagogical features contained a range of approaches (student-oriented, intensive, books-based) and components (undergraduate research, continuous assessment) that differentiate ELE from the previous and dominant forms of education in different countries.

Community features included a tightly knit community, an extracurricular programme, faculty members in the additional role of advisors/mentors for the students, and a specific ethos of the institution. The value of tolerance is often connected to the international character of ELE, and one work has underlined the role of participatory governance for sustaining the communal aspect of ELE.

Organisational features encompassed selectivity, a culture of excellence (superior educational results), and a connection between teaching and research. As innovative education, in one study ELE was presented as an alternative to the traditional structure of the academic departments.

Lastly, positional features dealt with the fact that an institution self-describes in the language of liberal arts, that it navigates between the tradition and innovation, that it distinguishes itself by offering education in English, and that it claims to contribute not just to the economy but to the democracy as well.

Individual features related to the intellectual, moral/ethical, and economic qualities of the ELE student and/or alumna.

Intellectual features covered a range of qualities of the mind. Through ELE, one can become a whole person, be broadly educated, become a lifelong learner, and develop imagination. One can also obtain general academic skills related to learning and communicating, recognize the importance of and make interdisciplinary connections. In one study ELE was presented as an end in itself.

<sup>16</sup> Only (Boetsch, 2017) mentioned both aspects as institutional features of ELE.

Moral/ethical features concerned how one treats other people – and there were many candidates. Students were to become virtuous, critical thinkers, responsible or mature, as well as sympathetic or tolerant. They would develop judgement, reflexivity, or a dedication to the public/common good in a democracy. There was also discussion of the autonomy and self-determination of a student in the ELE context.

Economic features covered some extrinsic rewards brought by ELE. Since its students were flexible and innovative, they were likely to be more employable in the knowledge economy that values so called transferrable or 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. But they were also unique or exceptionally talented individuals, either before entering ELE or as a result of it. Some authors portrayed ELE students as globally/interculturally aware persons or as people trained for the solving of problems.

### Results of the comparison

No single feature was mentioned by all 11 authors. Interdisciplinary curriculum came in closest, with 7 mentions. A significant variance in the responses prevents from seeing it as a dominant feature, either. Even taken together, neither subcategory was present in all interpretations. The common vision does not arise from the features – but some interesting patterns emerged.

Overall, 24 institutional features were mentioned 46 times whereas 22 individual features – 56 times. Among the institutional features the most popular were (mention count in brackets):

- The curriculum (14) – which is supposed to be interdisciplinary (7), allowing for student choice (5) and include a set of common requirements (3);
- Organisation (10 total) – based on selectivity (3), connection between teaching and research (2) and culture for excellence (2);
- Community (8) and pedagogy (8) – especially student-centred teaching (3) and tightly-knit student community (3).

The most popular individual features included:

- intellectual skills (20) - holistic development (4), general academic skills (4) and intellectual breadth (4), and
- moral/ethical features (19) - democratic engagement/concern for the common good (5), critical thinking (5), and responsibility/maturity (4).

Further patterns were revealed by the category of works. Four advocacy works offered 52 mentions of features (27 institutional and 25 personal); four empirical studies were more

focussed/analytical (13 institutional and 16 personal), similar to three conceptual works (7 institutional, 11 personal). Peterson and Torralba offered the smallest number of features of ELE (3 and 4 respectively), while the collaborative projects understandably offered the longest lists: UCDN (Dutch university college deans, 18) and the BLASTER project (led by Laurent Boetsch, 16).

Conceptual studies of ELE did not mention pedagogical, communicational, and economic features at all, and 83% of the features mentioned fall into the moral/ethical, intellectual, or community-related subcategory. Among the empirical studies, 31% of the features they mentioned were economic,<sup>17</sup> and not a single one related to the community aspect. Advocacy works offered the most balanced mix of features.

Although every advocacy study connected ELE to critical thinking (5), typically framed as democratic engagement (which is only one of the possible classifications), of the empirical studies only Godwin mentioned it. Three oft-raised features of interdisciplinary curriculum, holistic development, and democratic engagement were evenly distributed among various categories of studies. Tradition-related understandings ELE were generally less popular: the introduction to the heritage of (Western) culture was indeed mentioned eleven times, but only in two cases there was an expectation of this introduction to be based on the great books, of which only one saw it as an end in itself.

Finally, features can be used to build a range of themes cutting across the categories and subcategories. Themes help see the relative prominence of different ways of conceptualising ELE. The results of theme-building are provided in Figure 1 below.

*Figure 1. Features-based themes in selected works on ELE*

|                                    |                                |                            |                       |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| breadth (15)                       | interdisciplinarity (14)       | student-centeredness (12)  | generic skills (11)   |
| close student-faculty contact (11) | choice and responsibility (10) | democratic relevance (10)  | critical thinking (7) |
| internationalisation (5)           | excellence/selectivity (5)     | connection to research (5) | tolerance (3)         |

<sup>17</sup> This number might be artificially high given the classificatory and empirical nature of Telling's study (2018).

A few features were used to create more than one theme, therefore the mentions in brackets might in some cases be of higher value in comparison with the values from Table 3. It is clear that even those more holistic themes fail to identify a universally accepted understanding of ELE.

### Discussion of the features

Beyond revealing no common vision of ELE based on a set of universally acknowledged features, this exercise confirmed some further axes of ambivalence. The first question is whether the features should be viewed as descriptive or aspirational. Early works of advocacy seem to have described a common horizon rather than goals already achieved by ELE,<sup>18</sup> but from a certain, yet unspecified, moment, analytical works on ELE should be read as making claims about the educational reality.

The features of ELE were described often in a negative manner. Not only the rhetoric, but even the construction of the many features was mediated by the non-ELE forms of higher education. ELE was also introduced and defined against the popular misconceptions: that liberal education is a ‘superficial hopscotch’ over unconnected disciplines (Peterson, 2012b); that is a distinctive curriculum (especially a great books curriculum) rather than a distinctive approach to learning; that it belongs to ‘pedagogical enterprises’ rather than proper universities; that it constitutes a preparatory phase for the ‘real’ graduate studies; or that it is necessarily a politically liberal project (Becker, 2014).

Another inflection point related to the question whether ELE should be seen as an old or new approach to higher education. Telling (2018) studied how the (unpopular) humanities are repackaged through (increasingly) popular liberal arts degrees – and found the differences in how ELE is framed depending on the prestige of the institution. Elite English universities ‘simultaneously flatter and sift prospective students’ (2018, p. 14) by invoking the tradition and elite history of liberal arts to signal prestige; they used meritocratic and innovation discourses ‘precisely to conserve an historical advantage’ while the civic dimension was framed as the creation of future leaders. On the other hand, new universities presented ELE in a much more inclusive manner, invoking institutional qualities (rather than qualities of the

<sup>18</sup> The 1998 statement from Artes Liberales Association (which promoted liberal education in Central and Eastern Europe between 1996-2001) defined ELE through: ‘More interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary study, More and better teacher training, A closer integration of teaching and research, The introduction of an academic credit system as an instrument of freer choice of courses for students, Increased teacher and student mobility and exchanges, The exploration of new models of international education, A better balance of the tension between the quality of education and access to it’ (Artes Liberales, 1998).

degree), and avoiding the meritocratic distinctions so that the potential candidates from more disadvantaged background are not scared. Both types of institutions found ways to reconcile the old (tradition of broad, curiosity-driven learning) and the new (challenges of an interconnected world) of ELE. Telling concluded that for the most part, both types of institutions framed ELE as a way to set oneself apart in the job market, perhaps understandably in the marketized English higher education.

Some authors presented ELE as a defined, essentialist concept with clear boundaries. Becker called ELE a 'system of higher education' that complements rather than replaces existing forms of higher education before proceeding to define what liberal education is and is not.<sup>19</sup> Based on a survey of ECOLAS member institutions,<sup>20</sup> BLASTER project proposed a framework of 'common, essential characteristics' that prove 'specific nature' of LAS regardless of any 'diverse complementary aspects' proving its flexibility.<sup>21</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, Dirksen called ELE 'an ecumenical enterprise' that uses an 'inherently pluralist and somewhat ambiguous, vague format' (Dirksen, 2017). Reflecting upon the distinctive patterns in students' behaviour towards the curriculum at University College Utrecht during his time there (Renaissance men and women, Tailors, Shoppers and Avoiders respectively), Dekker urged the readers to 'embrace them, realising that if liberal arts is only one thing, it is nothing' (Dekker, 2017e, p. 31).

This tension between defined and decentred approach to ELE influences both curricula and research on ELE. For example, Taylor argued by making a theoretical decision to reject content-based approaches to liberal education, Peterson was then unable to convincingly explain the intellectual strength of liberal arts outside the US that made the basis for her study (Taylor, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> The vision presented by Becker evolved in interesting ways between 2003 and 2014 when the article was republished, or at least the rhetorical strategies did. In 2003 version, Becker asserted that LAS is not synonymous with 'a 4-year bachelor envisioned by the Bologna Process', that it is not an open curriculum with no requirements and that students engage with 'critical texts' – three claims dropped from 2014 version. The new version added a reference to rankings, the preferred phrasing changed to modern liberal arts 'and sciences' education, a claim that liberal education 'encourages interdisciplinarity' was added (Becker, 2014).

<sup>20</sup> No methodological details about the survey were provided. A list of ECOLAS membership can be inferred from Appendix 2.

<sup>21</sup> As the argument of this publication proceeds, two elements not mentioned in the framework were added: pedagogical qualities of the teacher (Called 'Full intellectual and personal potential and preparation in the kinds of skills appropriate to the world in which students will live and work' (Boetsch, 2017, p. 4)). and an institutional dedication to the goals and objectives of LAS education (It meant that teaching excellence should be (1) balanced with research; through (2) engaging, interactive classrooms delivered by (3) teachers sharing the qualities of LAS graduates to offer (4) a well organised pedagogy attending to the processual nature of teaching; and (5) implementing essential faculty practices: transparency, pedagogical approaches, continuous assessment, self-regulation, and alignment with the learning outcomes (Boetsch, 2017)).

### Summary of the features

With the global expansion of liberal education, 'The tent housing the enterprise has become a very big one' (Peterson, 2012b, p. 8). It should then come as no surprise that ELE has been described in a number of ways, but it is revealing that not a single feature was universally accepted by the major studies on the topic.

Empirical evidence from this mini-study of the static understandings of ELE suggested no consensus in the literature beyond the use of the phrase. The differences tracked throughout this section cannot be easily attributed to the organizational features of ELEs. They rather suggest a deeper disagreement, or possibly confusion, about the true meaning of the concept.

Some of the differences can be seen as the matter of accent, but some are significant to the point of contradiction. The literature did not provide an interpretation of this situation, much less a solution of those incongruencies. Neither did it openly claim that liberal education became a misnomer in the European context.

Without an overlap in the features, or a clear way to establish this overlap by rejecting some of the incoherent interpretations on the agreed methodological or theoretical grounds, this analysis has concluded that no common vision of ELE spontaneously arises from the features claimed in the literature.

### **2.2.3. FUNCTIONS**

An alternative understanding of ELE deals with the functions it performs within the larger system of higher education. Teun Dekker (2017) presents the most thoughtful of those functionalist interpretations when he presents liberal education as a solution to a range of problems that higher education had struggled with before: low student engagement connected to passive pedagogies, long average completion times driven by bad choices of narrow study pathways and low motivation, limited opportunities for challenging education for the most able students. In Eastern Europe, an additional factor was the need to build an open society; across Europe, liberal education was further aided by learning from the US models and the Bologna Process. With its flexible curriculum, engaging pedagogies, and motivational community of hard-working students, ELE offered a better alternative for the students and the taxpayers. Those functions explain why ELE was first conceived, and then survived and grew.

As was in the case of features, other scholars provided divergent descriptions of features, and those will be discussed shortly. But it is important to note that in the literature focussed on macro-scale analyses, functions were sometimes referred to as ‘rationales’ (Godwin, 2013). Such rationales were seen as either correcting pre-existing shortcomings or utilising arising opportunities in higher education. However, in this section, functions can take one of the two meanings: an explanation why ELE was created and survived, or an argument why ELE is needed. Both understandings deal with the ‘why’ question for dynamic understanding of ELE. To determine whether particular claim is a rhetorical argument or a causal explanation, systematic research would be required: since such study has not been yet attempted, and the evidence base for the claims presented is very limited, I decided to cover both types of dynamic understandings of ELE jointly.

The analysis of functions largely followed the procedure from the previous section. At times a single sentence contained a source of claims about both features and functions. Most works that suggested some features offered functions as well. The three authors discussed in the previous sections that did not mention any functions (Peterson, 2012a; Torralba, 2017; University College Deans Network, 2014) were replaced in this analysis by three other authors from the sample that offered only functions (Dahrendorf, 2000; Ivanova and Sokolov, 2015; Mikhailov, 2009). Here the authors were classified by the scope of claims made rather than by the character of the study, as some of the functions were suggested with reference to only Eastern or Western Europe, while others were allegedly pan-European.

Thematic coding has identified 25 functions that were classified into 10 subcategories falling into three main categories: educational, systemic, and external. Where the character of the function was not explicit, a judgement call from the context was made to classify the claim into appropriate function. The results are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Comparison of ELE functions in the selected literature

|                                     |              |  | Central and Eastern Europe |            |        |           |                 | Western Europe |         |         | all Europe |         |        |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|--|----------------------------|------------|--------|-----------|-----------------|----------------|---------|---------|------------|---------|--------|
|                                     |              |  | Farnham                    | Dahrendorf | Becker | Mikhailov | Ivanova/Sokolov | Van der Wende  | Boetsch | Telling | Godwin     | Dirksen | Dekker |
| Educational                         | Pedagogy     | Student centred learning                 |                            |            | +      |           |                 | +              |         | +       | +          |         |        |
|                                     |              | Lifelong learning                        |                            |            |        |           |                 |                |         | +       | +          |         |        |
|                                     |              | Increased learning (engagement)          | +                          |            |        |           |                 | +              |         |         |            | +       |        |
|                                     | curriculum   | Active pedagogies (delivery)             |                            |            | +      |           |                 |                |         |         |            | +       |        |
|                                     |              | Broad/innovative curriculum              |                            |            | +      |           |                 | +              |         | +       |            |         |        |
|                                     |              | Individualisation                        |                            | +          | +      |           |                 | +              |         | +       |            |         |        |
|                                     | Organisation | Defending the humanities disciplines     |                            |            |        | +         |                 |                |         |         |            |         |        |
|                                     |              | Selectivity                              |                            |            |        |           |                 |                |         |         |            | +       |        |
|                                     |              | Correcting rigid disciplinary structures | +                          | +          | +      |           |                 |                |         |         |            |         |        |
| Systemic                            | Political    | Innovation / autonomy                    |                            | +          |        |           |                 |                |         | +       |            |         |        |
|                                     |              | De-ideologization of disciplines         |                            | +          | +      | +         |                 |                |         |         |            |         |        |
|                                     | Cultural     | Open society                             | +                          | +          | +      |           |                 |                |         |         |            | +       |        |
|                                     |              | Cultural crisis                          |                            |            |        | +         |                 |                |         |         |            |         |        |
|                                     | economic     | Cultural competence / globalisation      |                            |            |        |           |                 |                |         | +       |            |         |        |
|                                     |              | Market meritocracy (signalling)          |                            |            |        |           |                 |                | +       | +       |            |         |        |
|                                     | structural   | Generic employability                    | +                          |            | +      |           |                 |                | +       | +       |            |         |        |
|                                     |              | Vertical differentiation                 |                            |            |        |           |                 | +              | +       | +       |            |         |        |
| Completion agenda / public spending |              |  |                            |            |        |           |                 |                |         |         | +          |         |        |
| Countering massification            |              |  |                            |            |        |           |                 |                | +       |         |            |         |        |
| External                            | Policy       | Catalysing systemic change               |                            | +          |        |           |                 |                |         |         |            |         |        |
|                                     |              | Bologna process                          |                            |            |        |           |                 | +              | +       | +       | +          | +       |        |
|                                     |              | OECD recommendations                     |                            |            |        |           |                 | +              |         |         |            |         |        |
|                                     | inspiration  | National policies                        |                            |            |        |           |                 |                |         | +       |            |         |        |
|                                     |              | Learning from US models                  |                            |            |        | +         |                 |                | +       |         |            | +       |        |
|                                     |              | Superficial Westernisation               |                            |            |        |           | +               |                |         |         |            |         |        |
| private partnerships (US colleges)  |              |  | +                          |            |        |           |                 |                |         |         |            |         |        |

Based on (Becker, 2014; Boetsch, 2017; Dahrendorf, 2000; Dirksen, 2017; Farnham, 1999; Godwin, 2013; Ivanova and Sokolov, 2015; Mikhailov, 2009; Telling, 2018; van der Wende, 2011)

### Descriptions of categories

Educational functions related to the pedagogy, curriculum, and organization of ELE.

Pedagogical functions framed ELE as a response to the need for student-centred learning, as employing active pedagogical formats, ensuring student engagement, or resulting in both immediate increase of results, and building the learning habits that would last a lifetime.

Curricular functions referred to the need for broader curricula (almost always on the bachelor's level), ELE as introducing an innovative and/or interdisciplinary education, as empowering students and developing them through a greater control over curricula (flexible and individualised or at least with a larger elective component), and finally by redeeming the value of the humanities (and arts) in university education.

Organisational functions stated that ELE reintroduces selectivity by challenging the most able students,<sup>22</sup> or that it offers something for students who are undecided<sup>23</sup> – or decided not to choose; in Central and Eastern Europe, ELE was additionally portrayed as blazing through disciplinary walls and making good use of newly restored university autonomy.<sup>24</sup>

Systemic functions dealt with the political, cultural, and economic impact of ELE as well as the structural role it played in the higher education context.

Political functions understood ELE as a result of and/or a tool for a political change. Those functions were limited to the former Eastern bloc where ELE was presented as an antidote to the previous ideologization and a source of renewal for the humanities and the social sciences. It was also supposed to instil in a new generation of students the ‘habits of living in an open society’ (Dahrendorf, 2000, pp. 58–9): initiative, dialogue, freedom, responsibility and an appreciation of equality.

Cultural functions either saw ELE as supportive of the development of judgment in students, transmitting core values of a high-minded humanity, countering the ‘philistinism of mass society’ that overtook much of higher education (Mikhailov, 2009), or interpreted ELE as inherently international and intercultural, concerned with global problems and perspectives.

Economic functions included signalling (that an alumni comes from a unique and prestigious programme), as well as the possession of the ‘broader epistemic base’ (Gürüz, 2012, p. 208) and transferable skills that secure ELE graduates an employability premium over pure specialists. This ubiquitous economic narrative was also sometimes phrased as ‘innovation and long-term employment’ (Becker, 2014), or a ‘new kind of human capital’ (Godwin, 2017a).

Structural functions were perhaps the most comprehensive. Some painted ELE as a force of change in higher education through introducing vertical differentiation (by reclaiming the elite university stratum by introducing higher entry requirements and offering more freedom). According to this argument ELE counters ‘overly egalitarian and democratic systems’ by following the US example in establishing ‘more selective branches of higher education focussing explicitly on excellence’ (van der Wende, 2011, p. 243). This tension between the elite status of ELE and its democratic ambition was even more pertinent in Central and Eastern European ELE. Furthermore, ELE was sometimes viewed as a better public investment: its

<sup>22</sup> Examples include: (Abrahám, 2017; Axer and Bikont, 2000; van der Wende, 2011); see also (Mehrens, 2006) for a counterargument where liberal education curriculum and pedagogy support students with less academic preparation and increase the likelihood they would thrive at a university setting.

<sup>23</sup> See for example: (Sokol and Pinc, 2015).

<sup>24</sup> See for example: (Dahrendorf, 2000); in Western Europe it has been raised that liberal education’s broader undergraduate degree challenges the dominant organisational philosophy of higher education in Europe (Boon, 2014; Mehrens, 2017).

flexible curriculum delayed chose and thus lowered dropout, while the work ethic from a learning requirement contributed to higher on time completion rates (Dekker, 2017b). Some claimed that ELE offered more intimate or personal learning environments that countered the massification trend; and finally, a few authors viewed ELE as a laboratory where successful small scale experimental units were being developed, whose success would eventually generate a holistic shift towards the model and values of ELE in higher education policy.

External functions dealt with the interventions from the sphere of policy, American inspiration or direct collaboration with promoters of the liberal arts.

Policy functions included the supportive role of the Bologna Process, which provided the ‘stimulus’, ‘impetus’, and ‘framework of opportunity’ (Boetsch, 2017, pp. 1–3) or at least facilitated the growth of ELE (Godwin, 2013; van der Wende, 2011). Another strand was the OECD recommendations to offer the alternatives for professionalised, narrow, job-oriented training (Marginson et al., 2008). Finally, national policies supportive of ELE were mentioned as well: for example, Dutch diversification through university colleges, and the role of Polish democratic transformation.

The function of (American) inspiration was either presented approvingly - in the case of European innovators visiting or learning about US liberal arts colleges – or disapprovingly as a sign of superficial Westernization (Ivanova and Sokolov, 2015). The latter argument was based on the fact that the Soviet university model had already offered key elements of ELE philosophy.

Lastly, collaboration with US partner institutions was raised by the then leaders of Smolny College (Koposov and Khapaeva, 2001), one of the international ‘marriages’ of Bard College (see: Becker and Gillespie, 2017).

### Results of the comparison

No single function was mentioned by all authors. The Bologna process was the most popular (5 mentions) with employability, a move towards student-centred learning, and support for the open society (4 mentions each). No clear lead of those functions over the others was established either. Neither subcategory was present in all interpretations. Within each main category:

10 educational features were mentioned 25 times:

- in pedagogy (11) the most popular were student centred learning (4) and increased engagement of the students (3);
- in curriculum (8) – individualisation (4) as well as broad/innovative curriculum (3);
- in organisation (5) – correcting the rigid disciplinary structures (2).

10 systemic features were mentioned 21 times:

- in political features (7) – support for the open society was the most popular (5);
- in cultural features (2) there was a draw;
- in economic features (6) – generic employability (4) was a clear leader;
- in structural features (6) – vertical differentiation (3);

And finally, among 6 external features mentioned 12 times.

- In policy (7) – the Bologna process (5);
- In inspiration (4) – learning from the US models (3);
- And in collaboration there was only one mention.

Regional patterns could be identified as well. ELE in Eastern Europe was most often discussed through the lens of political (5), curricular (4) and organisational (4) functions. Western Europe was primarily viewed through policy (3) and to a lesser extent economic, curricular, and pedagogical functions (2 each). On the pan-European level pedagogical functions (6) were most often raised, with the policy functions (4) in the second place. Those patterns are probably less telling than patterns in features because of the differences between the regions.

#### Discussion of the functions

The analysis of the features associated with ELE revealed a range of points for discussion.

The dynamics of ELE was sometimes presented in an ambivalent way. One author stated that 'Rationales for liberal education programmes echo international market pressures, changes to national labour forces and human capital, technological and scientific advancement, and economic institutional sustainability' (Godwin, 2015a, p. 18). But later the same author added that liberal education offered both a logical and contentious response to those pressures (Godwin, 2017a, p. 318).

Some of the features raised were arguably more generic, while others were very much rooted in the context of a particular country, institution, or a programme. The most comprehensive

attempt to explain the rise of ELE (Dekker, 2017b) focussed on amending the pathologies of mass-scale and narrow-scope higher education. This looks like a universal claim but is in fact mediated by the specifics of higher education delivery in the Netherlands in the 1990s. This leads to a larger methodological problem with the existing analytical works on ELE: despite a decent amount of case studies and a handful of grand theorizations, no clear way of connecting the two exists (as evident in but a few studies positioned in between two theoretical plains).

A further issue is related to the missing evidence for most functional claims. For example, the Bologna Process was said to be supportive of ELE. Yet apart from the general introduction of bachelor's degrees and modularised curricula, which were variously enacted across the European Higher Education Area, the Bologna Process was not intended to support any particular educational philosophy, and some of its goals (for example economic advancement) were arguably in contradiction with at least some of the functions of ELE mentioned in this section. To claim that any large-scale policy like the Bologna process was beneficial to ELE would require the evidence of the connection between the regulation and the creation and growth of liberal education developments. Analytical works on ELE offer the claims but rarely the arguments to back such claims. External functions, especially the mechanisms of US inspiration and support, share similar shortcomings.

While already extensive, the list of functions of ELE does not deal with a range of mechanisms of the promotion of this new idea: the role of direct sponsorship of some initiatives from the US sources (as opposed to inspiration or institutional collaboration);<sup>25</sup> the role of individuals or institutions enlisting the idea of ELE to advance their reformist mission; the oppositional and communitarian ethos of some of ELEs; and finally the role played by national fashions and isomorphism, especially when a prestigious university has introduced an ELE and other institutions followed suit (as at least seems to be the case in Poland, later in the Netherlands, and finally in the UK).

Another ambivalence arose from the question of multiple involvements of the authors who contributed to the literature on functions. Almost all descriptions were written from a fundamentally positive stance towards the introduction of ELE positively, and many researchers had been invested in ELE as administrators, consultants, or teachers. At the same time, even if those descriptions were biased, the causal claims might be invalidated but as rhetorical strategies they would remain in evidence.

<sup>25</sup> For example, The Endeavor Foundation sponsored ELEs in Warsaw and Bratislava for over two decades, and ECLA in Berlin for over a decade (Abrahám, 2017; Kontowski and Kretz, 2017).

Those limitations and complications help understand perhaps the most important conundrum of ELE, recently noted at the global level by (Boyle, 2019): why there are only so few liberal education programmes if all of those positive features are actually true. Despite the plethora of explanations and arguments compiled in this section, liberal education remained a stigmatised ‘anomaly’ on the periphery of higher education everywhere outside the US (Godwin, 2013) with limited impact on policy in any country (with the exception of the Netherlands), and ELE was no exception. It is possible that the broader higher education system is pitched against ELE, or that the problems with communicating the (otherwise compelling) idea prevented a broader adoption. But perhaps, more simply, some of the suggested functions were simply not true.

A partial answer can be pieced together from across the literature. On the one hand, much attention has been dedicated to the challenges for liberal education: financial (related to the decrease in the levels of state funding and vocational/marketable priorities of private donors) (Peterson, 2012b, pp. 12–13), high levels of governmental control over curricula, academic traditions (in the 1990s in Eastern Europe), or a faculty and student preference for ‘automatic pedagogies’. Against those challenges, ELE mounted what might seem as a surprisingly successful campaign to establish educational alternative.

But some scholars concluded that research on liberal education was complicit in the ‘neoliberal master narrative’ of individualised, marketable version of global liberal education. Godwin argued that a mindlessly upbeat repetition of individual, socio-political and economic benefits for developing countries using arguments originally raised about US liberal arts (Godwin, 2015a) called into question whether liberal education could actually produce agents of political change. She proposed a set of counter-narratives challenging the dominant narrative on history (calling for non-Western inspirations, curricula, and missions), students (delayed career choice, increased cost of attendance, lower institutional prestige), pedagogy (culturally dominant models of passive learning and related faculty training), curriculum (limitations of direct US transplants), as well as ideology (internationalisation as hurtful for the cultures which do not principally value borderless self-cultivation).<sup>26</sup> More recently, Godwin shifted her narrative even further, casting liberal education in the new light: a change from adapting to disrupting global tertiary norms to change the conditions that rob liberal education

<sup>26</sup>‘On the one hand, in many countries, it is a new way of knowing, being and doing. However, isomorphic tendencies and global neoliberal frames of reference increase the risk of cultural hegemony and a kind of intellectual imperialism within internationalisation. On the other hand, liberal education that is carefully designed, culturally relevant, which takes seriously learner-centred pedagogy, and which can operate in a designated refuge of academic freedom can be a means of producing more critically minded citizens. Bearing in mind the core purpose of critical theory, liberal education may be in itself a means for developing human potential for better resistance to neoliberalism and repeated cultural marginalisation’ (Godwin, 2015a, p. 17).

of legitimacy from the start (Godwin, 2017a, pp. 318–320). It should however be noted that the language of disruptive innovation is often connected to the master narrative liberal education allegedly tries to overcome.

### Summary of the functions

The study of the functions of ELE confirmed the broad variation in the explanations and hopes associated with this new idea. If Europe is not already close to the US where liberal education was with some dose of sarcasm said to mean 'awesome education' (Ferrall, 2011), it might be getting close to that state. And only to a certain extent can the enthusiasm and diversity be explained by the differences of geographical and institutional contexts or in the motivations of the individuals running or studying ELEs. A more positive interpretation would conclude that ELE was by many people seen as timely, relevant, and socially beneficial alternative to the mainstream higher education.

Whatever the assessment of the revealed pluralism, similarly to primary understandings (features), there is no universally accepted alternative understanding of ELE. The evidence collected for this mini-study suggested no consensus in the subject literature regarding the function performed by ELE. Either seen as explanations or as arguments, the proposed functions do not converge meaningfully on a meaning that could disperse the confusion around ELE.

Even more so than in the case of features, there seem to be some contradictions between the functions mentioned that call for further study or qualification. To some extent those contradictions might be the sign of times when 'multiversities' (Kerr, 1964) have been adding new functions to satisfy an extended range of stakeholders and their expectations. But the literature on ELE does not currently offer a theory organising those multiple claims, and more eagerly added new functions than reviewed those previously proposed, thus fuelling the confusion.

In the light of the above, it has to be concluded that the literature does not offer a base for a common vision of ELE based on the functions, either. But an argument might be made that ELE is discussed so confidently in the literature despite the lack of an explicit agreement because it assumes that some common paradigm exists which overarches this diversity and provide an archetype of ELE. The next section will focus on this issue.

## **2.3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

### **2.3.1. AMERICAN TRADITION(S)**

The American tradition of liberal education remains in the background of the study of ELE and one could argue that the inconsistency within ELE is simply a result of divergent implementations of a common American ideal. The problem with this assumption is that there does not seem to be such a common ideal of liberal education in the US, either. The difference in interpreting this concept was for example revealed with a significant force in tensions over the state of liberal education during the 'culture wars'; one does not have to look much further than to Allan Bloom and Martha Nussbaum to see how in the American context liberal education can mean contradictory things, and because of those differences, prominent authors would make divergent assessments of the current state of things and the desired future. Scholars who searched for a common theory of American liberal education have concluded that there does not seem to be any.<sup>27</sup> At times the US was in fact a place of bold reinventions of the aims and means of college education that were contesting the meaning of liberal education; the best example seems Grant and Riesman, 1978. Perhaps a similar dynamic can be observed in Europe of the last three decades.

### **2.3.2. WESTERN TRADITIONS**

Most histories of liberal arts education classified it as a Western phenomenon. According to this dominant interpretation, the idea and the practice of liberal education begun during the classical period of the Ancient Athens, unfolded through medieval and early modern universities in a range of European countries and survives to this day in the American liberal arts colleges.

The commonalities of the liberal education narrative were rather abstract in their nature. Liberal education dealt with what was perceived as the highest, most holistic, or fundamental knowledge for a given society. It aimed to teach a person how to live a good life (or to flourish) (DeNicola, 2014), to live fully and freely (Nugent, 2015), or to grow intellectually, emotionally, and morally (Mehrens, 2017). This noninstrumental orientation of liberal education was even suggested as the necessary component of any 'higher' education (Palfreyman and Temple, 2017, p. 121). At the same time, the exclusion of the supposedly lesser concerns and ambitions mirrored the double exclusivity of liberal education which for the most part of its history was

<sup>27</sup> See for example: 'I suspect, indeed, there is no such thing as the American theory of liberal education' (Green, 1976) quoted in (Kimball, 1995, p. 205). 'Surely "liberal education" is the most used and abused phrase in the rhetoric of higher education. Just as surely it has no universal meaning' (Katz, 2005).

severely limited socially and temporarily. Only a small elite was ever deemed eligible for liberal education and/or capable to benefit from it. And institutionalised liberal education happened only in what societies perceived as the late adolescence, the years of character building in transition to adult social roles.

For as long as liberal arts education existed, abstract commonalities like those mentioned above were complemented by the omnipresent contestations of aims and means of liberal education as well as its positive and negative identity. Scholars and practitioners disputed the overarching interpretation of the tradition, the direction of its historical evolution, and naturally the proper understanding of the term. Different individuals were hailed as the founding figures of liberal education, for example Isocrates (by Ernst Curtius), Plato (Werner Jaeger), or Aristotle (John Henry Newman) (Kimball, 2010, pp. 1–12). Those persistent contestations underwrote a multitude of institutional forms of liberal arts education, scattered across geographical and social locales over the course of centuries, and comprising a broad range of curricular, pedagogical, and institutional arrangements. In the recent history alone, this pluralism was suggested both as a source of vitality (Oakley, 1992) and as the evidence of a demise of liberal education in the West (Bloom, 1987).

This contested history of liberal education has itself been variously reconstructed by historians who offered diverse interpretations of the internal tensions, external boundaries, and the broad types of liberal education. This section will review two prominent yet divergent reconstructions of the history of liberal education historical classifications.

#### Kimball's Account

Bruce A. Kimball (1995) followed the uses of the phrase 'liberal arts education' (and its translations) since the Ancient Athens until the Second World War.

During the 'pedagogical century' (450-350 BC) many Greek poleis, especially Athens, moved towards democracy and found themselves in need of a new education that would produce a new type of citizen. Three approaches claiming to offer a solution emerged. The highly influential sophists trained youth in the skills of public persuasion, which was a central concern for a political system so reliant on the agora but paid little regard for the truth.

Two groups opposed the sophists on the grounds that any education of free citizens should deal with *logos* - a Greek term which translates, in Latin, as *oratio* and *ratio*, and in English 'speech' and 'reason'. Kimball argued that *logos* was a single source for two separate ideals of liberal education, the oratorical and the philosophical.

For the orators, liberal education was broad and general, rooted in ‘training a good citizen to lead society’ (37) through rhetoric as skill applicable to any path of public life. Unlike the sophists, orators underscored the importance of competence and virtue, respect for the inherited standards enshrined in the classical texts, and the need to view one’s privileged position in the social elite as a way to ‘make a difference in the world’ (35). Their epistemology was dogmatic: the student was to inform himself of the true values and lead his life and that of the others according to those values. The study of classical languages and later classical literature played the dominant role in the oratorical liberal education.

This oratorical ideal (*‘artes liberales ideal’*) dominated the history of the idea of liberal education from the Greek beginnings until the mid-XIX century, with the exception for the period when Thomistic philosophy achieved a temporary hegemony. The practice of oratorical liberal education arose from the seven liberal arts divided into trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic) and quadrivium (geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy), even though the exact seven *artes* were only codified at the end of the antiquity by Martianus Capella. For all their differences, Isocrates, Cicero, Quintilian, and later Augustine belonged to this *artes liberales* ideal. This ideal was reenergized by the renaissance humanists (228) seeking the creation of a broadly educated yet pious citizen, and was embodied in the pastoral, character-oriented education of the future elites at the early modern colleges of Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard, and Yale.

The philosophers offered a counterinterpretation in the form of a liberal-free ideal. Philosophers believed that any free citizen is capable and called to pursue a never-ending search of truth rather than the game of political influence. Dialectic (26), or logical analysis, provided the necessary tools allowing to either achieve certitude or reveal the uncertain basis for the inherited claims. Its sceptical epistemology called for the questioning of all received claims and hailed the search for the forever elusive truth as a self-rewarding enterprise.

This philosophical ideal (*‘liberal-free’ ideal*) exerted limited influence at the time it was first conceived by the ancient philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, or later Boethius. But it went on to have much bigger impact in the afterlife when it was redeemed by the modern science and housed at the centre of the XIX century universities. The liberal-free idea in the modernity entailed secularization, disciplinary specialization of research, and two ‘academic freedoms – to teach own expertise, and to learn according to own interests’ (162).

At first defending the set, fully-prescribed curriculum as delivering the ‘mental discipline’ worthy of a free person, towards the end of the XIX century it switched sides to promote an elective principle in the curriculum as offering the newly valued mental stimulation. Only later did the combined forces of pragmatism, Darwinism, and progressivism, further reinterpret

philosophical liberal education as a liberalizing education thus cementing an understanding popular until today.

The 'perpetual conflict' (33) pervading culture and liberal arts (11) goes back to the two poles of logos – speech and reason. The battle over the meaning of liberal education waged between the philosophers and the orators stemmed from the fundamental difference in goals and means associated with the concept. At certain points in history, the tension was almost palpable, especially when proponents of either ideal clashed in the open: this was the case with Socrates and Isocrates, C.W. Eliot and John McCosh, Thomas Henry Huxley and Matthew Arnold, or John Dewey and John Maynard Hutchins. Most of the time, however, the underlying disagreement lurked in the contested background of increasingly confusing uses of the phrase 'liberal education'.

'Orators' and 'philosophers' proposed by Kimball were ideal types: artificial constructs proposed *ex post* as approximations of the actual phenomena. They emphasized core elements to provide a framework for interpretation,<sup>28</sup> also they were dynamic in two principal ways. For most of the history, as the dominant idea was slipping into sophistry, the other increased in influence. Towards the end of XIX century, however, neither of the original ideals was compatible with the changed conditions. Accommodations of each ideal were developed to deal with the new realities of universal suffrage and increased access to higher education. Kimball believed accommodations brought the two traditions closer together, as a result of 'blurring of the arguments arising from the confrontation' and the 'forming of alliances against the common foes, particularly that of utility' (181). The negative definition of liberal education as non-professional or not useful was formed during that period.

The *artes liberales* accommodation dated back the Yale Reports of 1828 that defended the liberal culture as a tool for disciplining the mind rather than, as previously, for character formation. Around that period humanities disciplines adopted methodologies of historicocritical research (176). In response, this accommodation called liberal education to contribute to 'training the critical and self-reliant intellect' (177), 'making minds rather than making men', to raise the new intellectual aristocracy through a study of the works that 'stood the test of time'. *Artes liberales* accommodation gained curricular prominence with the

<sup>28</sup> Ideal types are also open to reinterpretations. For example, Nigel Tubbs (2015) saw the same tension in terms of discipline and freedom, (echoing Varro's metaphor of the closed fist of dialectic and the open palm of rhetoric), and proceeded to develop a theory of a philosophical and modern liberal arts education. Rene Arcilla (1995) sought to overcome the tension between Hutchins and Dewey, or the orators and philosophers, through conversational edification.

classical distribution system, later the survey course of the 1920s, and peaked with the 'great books' tradition.

The accommodation of the liberal-free ideal grew from the positivist belief in achievability of the absolute truth and was further shaped by the 'pressures for conceptual uniformity, institutional standardization, and curricular utility' (186). Increasingly professionalised faculty raised educational requirements at all levels and appealed to academic meritocracy.

Swarthmore College was perhaps the most visible embodiment of this accommodation with its selective admissions, an honours programme, competitive final examination, and measuring its success by graduate school admissions (191). By welcoming early disciplinary specialization, and elevating the natural sciences, this accommodation inspired many American private and public institutions during the post-War mass expansion period to restore educational standards along those lines.

Accommodations did not fully replace the original traditions,<sup>29</sup> but nevertheless played a major role in how liberal education was understood, offered, and promoted after the World War II.

Together with the increasing pluralism of American higher education and a certain disregard for history, the two traditions and two accommodations have contributed to the confusion in the concept of liberal arts. Prominent reports on liberal education either used a 'basket method' of listing all desirable (and contradictory) qualities pooled from the two traditions or preferred to talk about the 'general education' instead. More recently, Kimball argued that a third ideal of liberal education is emerging in the form of a 'pragmatic consensus'. This result of the dominance of American pragmatism and the debilitating impact of culture wars, marks a new departure in the history of a liberal arts education.

### Rothblatt's Account

Another approach to history of liberal education captures the tradition as the 'living arts'<sup>30</sup> as comprised of six distinct traditions:

- holism and character formation – liberal education provided a harmonious integration of personality. This educational utopia was built upon a conception of a human being as a micro-polis, first in its unity, and later in its diversity. The 'genius of the place' (25)

<sup>29</sup> There were still some influential embodiments of the original ideals. For example, Irving Babbitt represented the *artes liberales* ideal (and rejected the new humanism label), while Abraham Flexner institutionalised liberal-free ideal in the Princeton Institute of the Advanced Studies.

<sup>30</sup> 'They liberal arts are living arts in all meanings of the phrase: 'living' because they still exist and are necessary ways of ordering human experience, and 'arts' because they are practical and encompass every possible form of human inquiry and skill' (Rothblatt, 2003, p. 16).

- in which such liberal education was offered was more important than any curriculum. Close teacher supervision, residential arrangements, or a bucolic setting of the institution created a distinctive set of relations for liberal education.
- political leadership – liberal education constituted the common preparation of future ruling class based on a study of human nature as well as a training in persuasion to affect change in social settings. Liberal education inculcated shared values, typically through canonical works of literature and art. With the advent of a free market, mass democracy, and the challenges of social integration, this tradition adopted the new language of universal citizenship and its public obligations (30).
  - Breadth – liberal education valued the ‘habit of mind to select and discriminate’ (32), independence, judgement, tolerance and the possession of broad views. The principal avenue of such liberal education were interactive pedagogies. To a certain extent, Rothblatt claimed, breadth was present in all traditions of liberal education.
  - Personal development – liberal education was tied to the freedom to make individual choices and safeguarding the free society through self-reliance. Rooted in the Romanticism and political liberalism, this American tradition supplanted a ‘general standard of excellence’ (as suggested by Bildung tradition in Germany) by the individualisation of curricular choices and educational expectations. Countering this inner-looking emphasis were calls for integrated curricula, public service, social responsibility, or multicultural awareness (36).
  - Critical thinking – liberal education as liberation from prejudice, appropriate for the research ideal of a modern university with their academic freedoms, institutional autonomy, and temporarily suspending many social norms. This relatively recent tradition openly called students to critically examine all institutions, belief, and concepts (38). Rothblatt pondered to what extent critical thinking was ‘an intrinsic part of higher education’ (38) as such.
  - General education – liberal education as a common part of the college curriculum. Nowadays typically taking form of a distribution requirements over the first two years of a four-year college, this understanding of liberal education was born with the introduction of the course-credit system in the US (38-42). General education aimed at the breadth of exposure, intellectual maturity, and readiness to make an informed decision about the future academic trajectory. Since the exact shape of this more or less common part of the curriculum was contentious and temporary result of cross-institutional negotiations, its coherence and integrity suffered. The typical reaction to

its decline were calls for a certain common core curriculum or more consistent pedagogies.

Rothblatt positioned such multi-sided idea of liberal education in the close relation to the 'talismanic' (Rothblatt, 1997, p. 44) idea of a university. University as an idea was born long after the university as an institution. In the course of the XIX century Samuel Coleridge and John Henry Newman transformed the thinking about a university as a legal construction into an entity from the higher (moral, emotional) order. With the idea of the university, both wished to bring stability to the institution under pressure: they argued past uses would suggest the right principle to follow today.

Rothblatt related liberal education to 'the two stubborn traditions of idealising universities, the first English and the second German'. In the English tradition of the university, Newman understood the university as 'a place for teaching universal knowledge' (Newman and Turner, 1996, p. 3) created to produce 'emotionally whole and balanced people' (Rothblatt, 1997, p. 19). The ideas of Kant and Humboldt, on the other hand, led Rothblatt to study the complex and ambiguous relation between Bildung and liberal education.<sup>31</sup> Neither Newman nor Humboldt were discussed in Kimball's account.

American colleges and universities lacked the clarity of mission pronounced in the English and the German ideas of the university. Plurality of organisational shapes and functions found in this higher education 'system' stemmed both from histories and environmental interactions, especially with the multiple markets on which American universities operated. With stackable functions but no unifying idea,<sup>32</sup> the American university was not driven by the undergraduate liberal education even if it could not (and would rather not) absolve itself from this task.

If the 'living arts' are themselves part of the protean university, it is understandable that 'liberal education for all intents and purposes does not exist' (Rothblatt, 2003, p. 44).<sup>33</sup> Shaped by lower levels of education, as well as political, economic, and societal pressures, liberal education was never pure and always compromised in practice. With multiple goals, ideas, or

<sup>31</sup> For Rothblatt, Bildung and liberal education belong to separate traditions and institutional milieus but might also be seen as compatible and connected. 'Knowledge as the process by which the mind comes to understand itself also contains the notion of wholeness, the personality as totality. Therefore, at another level Wissenschaft and Bildung are part of the larger western tradition of liberal education'. (24, footnote). Bernt Gustavsson also counted liberal education as one version of European Bildung alongside the Humboldtian and Gadamerian approach (Gustavsson, 2014).

<sup>32</sup> Newman might have called such an institution a 'pantechicon' (as he did with University of London), Clark Kerr coined the term 'multiversity' (1964), while Rothblatt wrote about 'the great American university flamingo' (1997, p. 40).

<sup>33</sup> Cf. 'A single idea of a university has never truly existed, although in some periods fewer alternatives were available' (Rothblatt, 1997, p. 1). See also: 'University has history, not essence' (Koposov, 2001, p. 95).

functions of liberal education, Rothblatt sought unity in the ‘method, approach or the spirit of liberal education’ (15) underlining its changing historical forms.

### Divergences between the two approaches

Kimball and Rothblatt both rejected the *a priori* criteria for what counts as liberal education (normative or operational), and resolved to build an inductive picture, albeit from different theoretical angles. In the tradition of pragmatics, Kimball focussed primarily on the books and articles, or more precisely, on the occurrence of the words ‘liberal education’ in context.

Rothblatt analysed institutions that claimed to offer liberal education, their mutual influences and relative strengths, as they were interpreting and adapting the timeless ideal of humanity. The scope of their investigations differed, too: Kimball was primarily concerned with the contemporary American situation, Rothblatt aimed at a more global and multi-directional account (with some discussion of ELEs at the turn of the century).

Both Kimball and Rothblatt presented a pluralist reconstruction of liberal education: the concept was understood differently in the past, and none of those competing understandings was more legitimate than others. However, both accounts provided different accounts of this pluralism. Where Kimball saw continuity of the dialectical process, Rothblatt emphasized the new meanings concealing the older.<sup>34</sup> Kimball wrote about a binary tension fuelling the contestation, Rothblatt uncovered an archaeology of resemblances in the liberal education family. For Kimball the longevity of the concept stemmed from prestige, while Rothblatt credited the ‘universal yearning of human beings’.<sup>35</sup>

The examples of Kimball and Rothblatt show that (1) the history of liberal education was complex, not relying on a single common vision of the idea, and that (2) there have been divergent approaches to reconstruct the internal complexity of this idea. History of liberal education refers to ‘competing interpretations, a cluster of rationales, evolving curricula and pedagogy, and a diversity of educational programmes mounted by a succession of institutional forms’ (DeNicola, 2014, p. 475).<sup>36</sup> It seems that the contestations were itself part of the tradition of liberal education in the Western world:

<sup>34</sup> Only to conclude that ‘American definition of a liberal education bears almost no resemblance of that sophistic-Italic humanist tradition that created the notion in the first place’ (Rothblatt, 1997, p. 40).

<sup>35</sup> (Personal communication, 20.07.2018)). Kimball on the other hand credited the survival of liberal education on the prestige of its tradition.

<sup>36</sup> In another historical-philosophical account of liberal education, Daniel DeNicola mentioned the following goals: cultural transmission, the life of the mind, self-actualisation through cognitive and moral development, understanding and contemplation of the world, informed and responsible citizenship, and obtaining skills. Contemporary means to those goals include a ‘typical’ liberal arts

The changes of and uncertainties surrounding modern liberal arts education have become essential parts of its identity' allowing us to see how it 'constantly redefines itself (...) how it actually, in a self-reflective way, realises the critical thinking that it strives to convey to its students' (Mehrens, 2006, p. 29).

### 2.3.3. NON-WESTERN LIBERAL ARTS TRADITIONS

The search for a common vision of liberal education in the US or the tradition of what was called liberal education in the past was almost universally limited to the Western culture. But the recent rise of liberal education globally challenged this assumption as well, with various authors claiming that those developments had indigenous roots as well. Many non-Western traditions or ideals of liberal education (Godwin and Altbach, 2016) are now being suggested, adding different, centuries-old ideals to the conceptual landscape of liberal education. Examples include *Suzhi* education in China (Haishao et al., 2018), Tagorean education in India (Nussbaum, 2011), Japanese and Korean ideals of humanistic education (Yonezawa and Nishimura, 2016), Islamic *adab* (Memon and Zaman, 2016), as well as the philosophy of *Ubuntu* and Buddhism (Robinson-Morris, 2019).

The challenges of intercultural translation and comparison are formidable,<sup>37</sup> but for the study of ELE it is enough to note that in this situation even the pluralistic account of variegated Western tradition of liberal education does not provide an agreed scope of diversity of the phenomenon. In other words, no agreed paradigmatic example of liberal education seems to be available in the US practice, the history of liberal arts (including traditions, understandings, individuals, and institutions), or even in a single (Western) tradition that gave birth to this unique phenomenon.

curriculum (with general education, major, electives, experiential component), diverse pedagogical techniques, and common 'values and assumptions' (respect for 'student's autonomy and critical faculties', the 'love of learning' and the larger picture' of personal, social and moral implications') (DeNicola, 2014).

<sup>37</sup> Linguistic differences affect the study of concepts associated with liberal education (for example: free/freedom) in the Western tradition alone, given the diachronic changes in the meaning of the concept within one language (Lewis, 1960) and synchronic differences between different languages (Wierzbicka, 1997). A sensible comparison between Western and non-Western cultures comes with its own set of challenges.

## **2.4. EXPLAINING THE CONTEXT, JUSTIFYING THE STUDY**

### **2.4.1. RESULTS OF THE SEARCH FOR A COMMON VISION**

This chapter has so far reviewed a range of possible places where a common vision of ELE could be found. Starting from the most concrete (organisational practices) through the mediated (features and functions proposed in the literature) up to the paradigmatic (US practice, history, and broader tradition), it did not identify a common vision of ELE in the existing state of knowledge. The consequence for communication is that when one uses the term 'liberal education', however narrow or broadly the scope of reference, their audience cannot assume they understand what they have in mind.

Furthermore, there is no agreed approach to the diversity of potential understandings as no common framework for discussing such a common vision across different types of sources seems to exist either. Historical literature discussed themes or traditions; organisational landscape revealed institutional models or interpretations; and literature made claims about the features or functions. It is unclear how to translate any particular meaning of liberal education between those different frameworks.

Of the three levels of abstraction reviewed, analytical works on ELE seem the most relevant for a study of a common vision that could exist but was not yet located by the scholars.

Organisational practice lacks currently a centre of attention (network, institution, leader) that would be a likely source of such unifying narrative; the history of liberal education was so far pluralist in orientation, uncovering contested interpretations of the term and also divergent narratives about those contestations. Analytical works are written from the position of both an insider and an outsider of current developments of ELE. Seeking a comprehensive narrative explaining the ambiguous picture of ELE, analytical works might even be slightly biased towards unity.

The existing analytical works however do not offer such a common vision of liberal education. Liberal education is said to be 'a small, but potentially, meaningful, global trend' based on a 'number of conflated and contested' concepts (Godwin, 2015b, p. 2) but the review of existing sources suggests that liberal education in contemporary Europe does not seem to be based on any common or even dominant vision. No uncontroversial way of solving the differences between the claims appearing across a range of analytical works appears, making it even more interesting why the concept is even in use given that it is so vague if not contradictory.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> For example, liberal education has been described as both practical and impractical; as limited to the humanities disciplines and spanning fields as distant as science and engineering; as an education for its own sake and as a superior preparation for a satisfying work; (as limited to the bachelor's degree or

The analysis conducted for this chapter also revealed that the debate on ELE in the literature had not yet realised its full potential. Empirical studies rarely provided systematic evidence for their claims. Conceptual studies made normative claims about ELE with little argument to support them. Either type of analytical works did not critically evaluate previous arguments, whereas studies from one category practically ignored those from others: for example, empirical and conceptual works did not consider the pluralism of liberal education revealed in the history as a serious possibility for ELE today. Overall, there seems to be a limited appetite to deal with theoretical differences or contradictions within ELE. Those might be some reasons for the emerging confusion about the vision, resulting in a 'pluralistic absence of clear theories' (Taylor, 2017) about ELE.

This unrealised potential prevents us from concluding that no common vision of ELE exists. It might exist but was simply not identified in the analytical works. The question of a common vision remains open. This problem might be presented as a research gap in at least two distinctive ways, both interested in answering whether there is enough of a common vision in ELE to call it a pan-European movement. But each approach would conceptualise the problem differently, and as a result propose different measures to address this problem.

#### **2.4.2. THE PHILOSOPHICAL PATHWAY: POSSIBLE ONTOLOGIES**

A philosophical study of ELE is concerned with the nature or the right argument to be made about ELE. Its primary method would be the exploration of the texts and thoughts in light of the previous texts and thoughts that might have informed the current arguments. Those previous interpretations might work as hypotheses for the study, while the evidence to be reviewed are the current arguments about ELE. The contemporary offers a point of entry, but the ultimate concern is in the universal.

One example of a philosophical question directed at ELE relates to ontology: what ELE really is? Ontological positions might be seen as assumptions about the nature of reality that serve as lenses through which we observe the world. Those ontologies shape potential reactions to the state of ELE outlined here. I believe that at least five different ontological positions can be mobilised to interpret the current state of a common vision of ELE. A philosophical study of a vision of ELE could therefore be informed by the following five ontological perspectives.

Essentialism holds that, despite all superficial differences, ELE has one common essence. This essence can be variously defined, for example as an overlap between distinct interpretations

applicable in high schools, at the master's, and even the PhD level); as a study of the Great Books or as a collaborative solving of the big problems or big challenges.

or as a common spirit animating its manifestations. But the function of this essence is to distinguish ELE from everything else<sup>39</sup>. Notwithstanding all real differences between ELE institutions, curricula, communities, or philosophies, ELE is and must refer to a common essence. An essentialist reaction to the results of the literature review would call for identifying the essential qualities of liberal education in general, or ELE in particular, and on the basis of those qualities distinguishing between the legitimate and illegitimate interpretations and manifestations of ELE. The reality appears to be confusing because of the impostors.

Relativism assumes the opposite: ELE might very well mean different things to different people because there is no shared essence or a set of practices that would allow us to agree on the proper use of the concept. ELE might be either a floating signifier or simply whatever people claim it to be. The meaning of ELE is relative to the sources of the claim, and because this is such an abstract concept, we should be especially careful about the power structures that might produce an illusion that some of the meanings are more legitimate than others. The criterion of self-description is also congruent with relativism, because in the absence of an external reality in which meaning can be legitimately anchored, ELE is what people make of it. The many and contradictory interpretations of ELE are hardly surprising, because if the term is attractive, it is going to be used for a range of purposes. What is interesting is not that people do not agree on the meaning of the term, but how the social reality produces those divergent meanings.

Pragmatism focusses on the communication and collaboration: if the current situation allows for ELE to survive and even grow, the lack of a consensus is inventing a problem where there is none.<sup>40</sup> If ELE happened, it was certainly possible, which means that there was enough of a consensus between people despite any differences they had. A pragmatist reading of the current situation of ELE would therefore focus on the meaningfulness of the imperfect

<sup>39</sup> Essentialist approach stems from the tradition of Platonist philosophy, with German idealism allowing for more historical view of the nature of ideas. Most classical definitions of liberal education fall in this category. For a contemporary case seeking the 'elusive distinctiveness' of liberal education in the link between 'the intrinsic value of learning' and 'the aim of living a cultured and flourishing life', see (DeNicola, 2012). Monism is often taken by philosophers who believe in the unity of the concept under or above the historical and institutional diversity in particular goals and means.

<sup>40</sup> Dewey, for example, held that education is a social process, so a concept might never be realised in the same way in two different societies; the relation between different forms of the same concept would then be closer to family resemblances. Kimball's later work with David Paris (2000) builds upon on this tradition and proposed that an 'overlapping pragmatic consensus' emerges in the US liberal education, offering an imperfect consensus, a 'political, not metaphysical' common frame of reference that 'perhaps provides all that can be in a pluralistic society'. Also close to this approach seems Rothblatt's reconstruction of liberal education as constitutive of various themes arising at different points in time, fluctuating in prominence between times and contexts, and remaining always open to compromises (Rothblatt, 2003).

consensus as located between a shared theoretical agreement and purely symbolical use of the term. A few outliers in the distribution of interpretations or manifestations are not enough to upend the existing collaboration. A common vision might help, but not always, so we need to be more flexible about how we study and do ELE.

Pluralism holds that any common vision would always be only a temporary, abstract generalisation hiding the fundamental disagreements about the nature of ELE.<sup>41</sup> Those disagreements are constitutive for the concept and ultimately unsolvable. The tradition of liberal education provides evidence that the disagreements about the meaning of the core concept were always there. The current disagreements are but a new chapter in this debate. ELE is united only because it is divided between the powerful alternatives contesting the meaning of a (true) liberal education. This contested nature makes achieving a consensus of a common vision impossible; however, there is a value in competing elucidations of what it might or should mean. But while pluralism accepts that there will be more than one legitimate interpretation of the idea, it does not mean that term can mean anything; we still need to exclude impostors by rejecting the claims that do not seriously engage with other elucidations and the tradition of the concept.

Systems thinking assumes that any social concept denotes a range of variants scattered across the spectrum of possibilities, and ELE would be no exception. The claims about ELE presented here provide a set of interesting hypotheses regarding how forms of ELE adapt to multiple environments in order to survive. If they survive, it means that they adapt well. The diversity in itself was to be expected. Especially interesting for the systems thinking perspective are the outliers: programmes or claims made about ELE in one or only few of the cases on the margin of the distribution. Their importance stems from the balancing act between the difference and survival: they are challenging the boundaries of the system and the assumptions about its winning strategy. Those outliers create the possibilities at the margins that over time can spark a change of the whole systems. In the broader higher education system, ELE might be this kind of an outlier challenging the dominant logic of the system: what matters most is how ELE is really executed and to what result.

Those five ontological perspectives offer divergent readings of the legitimate and illegitimate claims made about the concept and practices of ELE. It is possible that the variety of possible

<sup>41</sup> Pluralist approach holds that major social concepts are 'essentially contested', that their essence lies in the competing elucidations of the concept as proposed over history. Similar position is taken by studies of the divergent meanings of word 'free' within one language (Lewis, 1960) and the differences in the meaning of core concepts across different languages (Wierzbicka, 1997, pp. 125–155). For liberal education. Kimball's account of the history of the idea of liberal education displays strong pluralist notes.

ontological lenses affected what scholars called a floating identity of liberal education (Mehrens, 2006, pp. 23–30). The five ontologies might be a base for a philosophical study concerned with different aspects of the common vision of ELE.

#### **2.4.3. THE EMPIRICAL PATHWAY OF THIS STUDY**

This study is instead concerned with the descriptive aspect of the common vision by asking about the constitutive actions or perceptions of ELE. It applies some of the methods of sociology for the collection of data and data analysis in order to compare individual perceptions of ELE from the relevant actors. A qualitative, exploratory collective case study of the first leaders used interviews and thematic coding to answer: what vision of ELE did its first leaders follow?

This study would seek a common vision not in the literature but in the human action which the literature tries to summarise. So far analytical works on ELE have almost never analysed empirical data, and they sought commonality in the results of social action, not in the intentions. But intentions are both relevant and possible to compare, and they can be used as an entry point to the study of how ELE has been enacted and understood. This study will then seek some systematic framework of comparing individual visions in a methodologically controlled, reflexive way, in order to either reveal a candidate for the kernel of a common understanding, or to confirm there is no such common vision and map the existing differences.

This study will focus on contemporary theorisations of ELE, leaving the practice, context, and the history of each vision in the background. It will follow the example of the ongoing studies in the broader sociological tradition on perceptions of ELE in the UK (Telling, 2018), across Europe (Dekker, 2017) and in the US (Gardner, 2016), but also the comparative, evidence-based, and inductive logic of the historical works (Kimball, 1985; Rothblatt, 2003). It will also seek to create more synergies between the conceptualisations and facts as it was the case in previous research on ELE, and it will use the opportunity to interact with the relevant actors to better understand their vision of ELE.

This type of an empirical study is both feasible and urgent. ELE has entered a phase in which the first leaders have now the benefit of hindsight to reflect on what they wanted to achieve and how those hopes have materialised. First leaders rarely published about their vision so far, and they are often retired or about to retire. If one wants to recreate their visions based on interviews, it seems much more possible than 10 years ago, and probably more possible today than in 10 years' time. I discuss the approach to interviewing used in this study in section 3.4.

Additionally, I chose to do an empirical study mindful to design it in a way so that the results are relevant for other scholars of ELE, including those of more philosophical inclination. While I was informed by the ontological questions outlined above and interested in the broader philosophical tradition of liberal education, I do not claim a contribution to philosophy. I will therefore bracket out the explicitly philosophical questions until I return to reflect on the potential significance of the results to a future philosophical study on this topic (see section 6.2). There are however areas of perhaps implicit influence of philosophy on this study: the choice of a research method, the way of reflecting on the interaction with the first leaders, the reflexivity throughout and hermeneutical approach to the latter part of data analysis. This study should be viewed as empirical social science (or as belonging to the interdisciplinary fields of education studies and higher education research).

In the above specified sense, this study will seek to understand a new phase in the development of liberal education. Its return to Europe was not expected and with the exception of 'Artes Liberales' Association active in Eastern Europe between 1996-2001, there seem to be little evidence of coordination or even systematic consultations between ELEs. The larger phenomenon arose from largely independent developments that might or might not have responded to similar pressures or pursued some shared goal. It seems paradoxical that on the one hand, the earliest developments in ELE were said to be driven by leaders who 'seemed to have an excellent sense of what the concept meant as well as its civic importance' (Farnham, 1999, p. 1), and on the other hand, from the time perspective, it is not clear at all what ELE means. An empirical study might be a way of linking the theoretical reflection of ELE with the, never before studied, intuitional ways of grasping the concept.

As the number of ELEs keeps growing, and the range of meanings associated with ELE grow even further as a consequence, there appears to be some concern about the common understanding of the phenomenon. Organisations of some ELE institutions (for example ECOLAS or UCDN) have published or are about to publish declarations seeking to establish some sort of a definition of ELE. An informed review of the existing practices is a timely addition to this debate before actors are asked to take sides in this debate (I will return to this issue in section 6.3).

This study will provide new data about the vision of ELE by exploring the intentions of eight first leaders. It would enhance our understanding of ELE primarily through providing an answer to the research question concerned with the status of ELE as a movement. The selected pathway for providing this answer is an exploratory collective case study: methodology and sample will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **CHAPTER THREE. RESEARCH DESIGN: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH**

This chapter conceptualises the research question and elaborates upon the pathway taken to answer this question. It discusses the role of an exploratory collective case study of the first leaders in determining whether there is enough of a common vision behind ELE to permit us calling it a conscious or at least an accidental movement. The first section presents the theoretical framework of the study, while the following sections are dedicated to data selection, collection, analysis, and presentation. Researcher bias and ethical dilemmas faced in this research are discussed where they appear rather than in a separate section.

### **3.1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

#### **3.1.1. VISION: A CORE CONCEPT OF THIS STUDY**

The literature review did not reveal a common vision of liberal arts education or a coherent theoretical framework which this study could follow. The historical literature offers a discussion of themes or traditions of liberal education. A review of institutions offers organisational interpretations of ELE. The literature discusses features and functions of ELE: features distinguish ELE from what it is not, while functions offers explanations or arguments for what it is. Functions, occasionally referred to as 'rationales', had been divided into global macro, national macro, and micro rationales (Godwin, 2013, p. 114). The first two deal with the trends and policies affecting higher education; micro rationales, defined as 'specific to institutions, programmes, courses or individuals' (115), were typically discussed as little more than a side note.<sup>42</sup> Micro rationales offer a starting point for this study, which intends to capture the vision arising from the intentions of the first leaders.

From here onwards, a vision of ELE will be understood specifically as an intellectual attempt by the leader to make sense of the particular embodiment of ELE. It is not synonymous with the original intention, since a vision is a present understanding of the past events and ideas. A vision is a product of the reflection on both the original intention and subsequent implementation, striving to negotiate the difference between the two. This vision is produced by the leader in a dialogue with a person interested to know what this leader wanted all along

<sup>42</sup> See this example showing how Godwin uses the term micro-rationale: 'Focusing on Europe, faculty initiatives in Russia and Poland that developed into the Smolny College partnership, and the Collegium Artes Liberales as well as related organizations, respectively, are examples of liberal education *micro rationales* [emphasis in original] (2013, p. 115)'.

from his ELE project. While necessarily a distortion of the past (unlike an image that can be reconstructed from historical sources), such a vision might be seen as biased towards coherence, looking for a golden thread going from the original intention, through various stages of implementation, functions the program performed – as observed from the vantage point of the present.

Unlike the institutional or managerial vision of ELEs, this understanding of a vision puts the emphasis on an individual who has thought the project through. Vision offers a possible perspective on ELE, without either naïve idealism or boundless suspicion. While produced through a semi-public interview, a vision is ultimately produced for the public use. The reason why it takes an interview to generate such a vision stems from the belief that clarity comes from a reflection, and a reflection is aided by an informed and interested dialogue. Put differently, a leader might not normally have the time or ability to address a range of ‘why’ and ‘what if’ questions that generate positionality. But the evocative power of conversation helps generate than the individual would be able to produce on their own, even if they remain conscious about oversharing. A vision in this sense is the cornerstone of this study.

After deconstructing the concept of ELE (see Chapter Two), by showing that there is no common vision established in the literature, this study proceeded to reconstruct individual visions of ELE among its originators based on the interviews designed to reveal their intentions. It then analysed those visions to determine the degree of overlap between them through a series of analytical exercises discussed in section 3.5. Based on the extent of this overlap it attended to the possibility of reconstructing a common vision of ELE among the originators. How exactly does an empirical study produce an answer to this question will be discussed in more details from section 3.2.1. onwards.

The research strategy focussed on the vision, instead of the intentions of the first leader, can now be defended. Within a generation, a range of ELEs have been created across Europe, burgeoning in higher education spaces seemingly lacking institutionalised, self-describing liberal education for at least two centuries. Every person that started an ELE programme could reasonably be assumed to have some intention to create a self-styled liberal education programme. Those intentions were not subject to a systematic study so far, quite possibly because it is not possible to have unmitigated access to the past intentions of another person. An individual can always decide which of their intentions to reveal and cannot be trusted to be an unbiased source of knowledge about their intentions from the past. The intentions are integrated into processes of sense-making to achieve coherence between the current views and the past actions of an individual.

Rather than considering such coherence as a distortion of the original intentions, this study treats it as a springboard to generate an interpretative framework. A person interviewed about their intentions was assumed to be reflecting on their actions to produce a public-oriented face for their project -- an individual vision. In this vision, a leader offers an interpretation of how the interplay of the intentions and the environment produced the current results.

An individual vision could therefore be seen as a holistic interpretation of ELE that bridges the intentions, functions, and features. In Chapter Two, I have identified the diversity of features, functions, and the organisational models of ELE, or in other words, the diversity of the results of the implementation of ELE. But it might be that a common set of intentions produced diverse results given the divergent conditions of implementation that could have required conscious adaptation to the environment or entail some serious unintended consequences. To make an argument for or against the unity of ELE, one has to account for the intentions. A vision offers the closest approximation of those intentions. By recreating (or generating) the visions of first leaders, one could better understand the potential overlap in their individual intentions that would warrant calling ELE a movement.

### **3.1.2. MODELS**

Movements are typically built around a desire for social change and collective action to achieve it. A common desire can be understood as relating to some form of a vision of the ideal future (or the past to be reverted). Successful collective action normally requires a degree of overlap between the intentions of individuals. ELE could be more precisely be understood as an intellectual movement, that is a movement around the common idea rather than coordinated action, and the theoretical framework of this study reflects this specificity.

I will argue that whether or not a number of developments can be considered a movement depends to a large extent on the intentions of the people who make up the supposed movement. After all, movements are characterized by groups of people striving towards a particular goal of social change. So even if there are few common features (curricular, pedagogical, institutional) or few observable organisational connections between them, it is still possible that a high degree of overlapping intentions warrants calling it a movement.

The question of a common vision of ELE can be answered in two principal ways (positive and negative) and two modalities to each approach, as presented in Table 5 below. The models emerging from those dissections represent ideal types and as such, they offer stark, binary choices, whereas of course social reality is ultimately better captured as a matter of degree.

*Table 5. Models for the empirical study of ELE*

| ELE              | Immediate<br>(stated by the participants) | Mediated<br>(stated by the researcher) |
|------------------|---|--|
| Common vision    | A movement                                | A countermovement                      |
| No common vision | A dynamic of core and fringes             | A misnomer                             |

Model 1: ELE is a movement

This model states that the initiators of ELE could link their actions back to a common vision of ELE.

This interpretation of the movement follows Spiegelberg's (1965) reconstruction of a phenomenological movement. In this interpretation, phenomenologists are seen as intellectually unified despite significant internal diversity. As such they lend themselves well to a study concerned with questions of unity, diversity, and identity of ELE.

Spiegelberg called phenomenologists 'a movement whose variety is more characteristic than its connecting unity' (p. XVIII) to the extent that 'the underlying assumption of a unified philosophy subscribed to by all so-called phenomenologists is an illusion' (p. XVII). Dynamic in nature, phenomenological movement consisted of several parallel currents without 'a definitive and predictable destination' (p.2).

While phenomenologists had Husserl and 'Jahrbuch...' as a common point of departure, ELE does not. Yet for Spiegelberg such objective measures of a movement were anyway less important than the subjective criterion of adoption and subsequent conscious adherence to a set of rules.<sup>43</sup>

If the study of the originators of ELE could establish a set of consciously adhered to rules which those leaders followed and advanced, there would be a reason to call them a movement in this sense. Beyond agreeing to those limited common rules, members of the movement were still free to contest the proper meaning of the term/concept/practice (as it seems to be the case in the history, see section 2.3.2).

Model 2: ELE is a misnomer

<sup>43</sup> In the case of phenomenological movement, the criterion was 'explicit or implicit adoption (...) of the methodological rules' of 'direct intuition (...) as the source and final test of all knowledge (...) [and]] insight into essential structures as a genuine possibility and a need for philosophical knowledge' (p. 6).

The opposite model states that the variance of understandings of the concept among the initiators was so significant that no common vision can be reconstructed.

In this interpretation, the commonality of ELE exhausts itself in a common name. ELE is a confused concept because it is used by various actors to describe a range of practices with no patterns arising to explain those attributions in a coherent manner. If that was the case, ELE has no descriptive value because it is not reflective of any common vision. The only potential interpretive value of the contradictory self-descriptions might be for studying what motivates different actors to enlist the concept to their purposes.

Beyond the movement-misnomer binary, there seemed to be at least two additional modalities of each position.

#### Model 3: ELE is a complex of core and fringe interpretations

This model states that the initiators were aware of the differences in the interpretation of the core term and are able to differentiate between the dominant approach and illegitimate interpretations.

This interpretation assumes that the participants acknowledge different motivations among the users of the concept, perhaps even a degree of opportunism. Therefore, the concept of ELE does not presently refer to a common vision, but this situation is only a result of the fringe activity that distorts the 'real' activity of the concept. If a vision is prominent but not common (universally accepted), and the alternatives seem disorganised and incoherent, a case might be made to distinguish between the core and the fringe interpretations.

A situation like this might suggest challenges to the existing hegemony and should be seen as ambivalent (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014). From the perspective of the centre, this scenario might be presented as a situation of a genuine interpretation being undermined by the impostors. From the periphery of the concept, the same emerging interpretation would often be viewed as the beginning of a much-needed process of disruption of the status quo of ELE (or a paradigm shift). The struggles over legitimacy of the concept would affect how it is seen.

#### Model 4: ELE is a countermovement

This model states that the researcher could reconstruct a plausible common vision of ELE, even though the originators did not explicitly adopt those rules.

Countermovements are typically understood in a negative manner: as coordinated social action responding to an existing movement in order to prevent it from achieving their goals,

see for example (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). In this work, however, I am using this term in the older, atypical meaning first proposed by Karl Polanyi in 1944 (Polanyi, 2001): a countermovement as (1) positive and restorative/balancing, and (2) unacknowledged phenomenon reconstructed by the researcher.

Polanyi used the term 'countermovement' to describe a second step in a double movement of a modern society economy: where the movement towards laissez faire had generated a countermovement restoring the stability to the economy and offering self-protection to the society. A countermovement in this sense goes beyond both a negative and a defensive mechanism: it 'can be personified as the action of two organizing principles in society, each of them setting itself specific institutional aims, having the support of definite social forces and using its own distinctive methods' (2001, p. 138). A countermovement constitutes a broader reaction of the society, utilising 'ideological openings' where the logic of the original movement collapses (Block, 2008, p. 7). Countermovement exposes the inconsistencies of the dominant explanations to either limit or challenge their influence.

It takes a researcher to connect the dots and identify a countermovement. Polanyi noted that 'the countermove against economic liberalism and laissez faire possessed all the unmistakable characteristics of a spontaneous reaction. At innumerable disconnected points it set in without any traceable links between the interests directly affected or any ideological conformity between them.' (Polanyi, 2001, p. 156). Countermovements might come in different shapes: they can be composed of various social classes or actors, might take shorter or longer to consolidate, and be stronger or weaker. Arguing for ELE as a countermovement would entail reconstructing a common vision not acknowledged by the participants. From the shared dissatisfaction with the dominant social process, independent manifestations of the common vision arise with the participants unaware of the common interest or ideology. The countermovement hypothesis would see the researcher making an argument for an overarching (dialectical) framework comprising both action and reaction in the social sphere.

An example of an educational countermovement can be seen in the work of Grant and Riesman (1978) who studied post-1960s reforms of US higher education. They argued that various actors shared the dissatisfaction with the departmental structure and a research ideal, but they rejected them for different reasons and proposed different (positive) alternatives to restore the balance between the aims of higher education. Researchers looked for an overlap in those proposals collectively making for a countermovement the participants were not aware they formed. Grant and Riesman offered an interpretation that explained the reasons of dissatisfaction, classified alternative models, and traced the (mostly short-lived) attempts to make them viable.

### **3.1.3. THE WAY TO ADDRESS RESEARCH QUESTION AND MODELS**

This study seeks to establish the degree of explicit or implicit common vision among the initiators of ELE. It generates and analyses new data to answer which of the four models best describes the current situation and, in this way, improves our understanding of ELE.

The four models outlined above play an important part of the final data analysis, and their origins can be traced to the earlier stages of the research process. By casting the four models, I have conceptualised the research question in a way that reflects the logical possibilities of social action. It is, however, possible that some other models could be used as well, as a conceptual framework is only a heuristic to capture the reality in a way that reflects the preferences and blind spots of a researcher (I will return to this point in the assessment of this study in Chapter Six).

Furthermore, this conceptualisation treats the vision of ELE as a dependent variable -- that is, something yet to be described and understood. This approach reflects the historic studies of liberal education which have followed the use of the concept without pre-emptively determining which of them are more worthy of being followed. Answering the research question conceptualised through the four models would cast a new light on the organisational complexity of the forms of ELE and on the confusing state of the literature. But for this contribution to be possible, this study needs to transcend the existing claims about ELE. It can only do so by accessing new data about individual visions of ELE; these data will be treated as evidence as I respond to the question regarding the common vision of ELE.

## **3.2. RESEARCH LENSES AND FOCI**

### **3.2.1. PARADIGMS OF THE STUDY**

#### Exploratory, inductive, qualitative research

This study was designed as an exploration of the terrain of ELE in search of a common vision. Using a (tentative) theoretical framework described in section 3.1., it aimed to scrutinise a range of existing examples of ELE to answer the research question. This exploratory study sought to determine the existence of a common vision of ELE, not to provide a comprehensive explanation for the result. Naturally, the result of this exploration could in the future studies be subjected to an assessment of the actual practices, search for causal explanations, or comparisons to visions of liberal education in other locales, past and contemporary (the limitations and avenues for further research will be discussed in section 6.2).

This exploration was driven by an inductive logic, in which ELE was treated as a dependent variable. Because the existing state of knowledge revealed the contested nature of the term, ELE was seen as a concept that has yet to be defined, operationalised, categorised, and theoretically developed by collecting appropriate data. At the same time, the ultimate research question related to the common vision behind ELE crystallised at a relatively late stage of data analysis, and the models even later than that, based on a thorough understanding of the collected material.

The need for a close examination of a complex phenomenon through a specifically designed, flexible research tool allowing the exploration of variation in different social settings called for the use of qualitative research design (Creswell, 2008). Moreover, qualitative research design allowed for the production of so-called Mode II knowledge generated in and for the context of application through pooling multidisciplinary perspectives of the participants and researchers (Gibbons, 1994). Lastly, this study attended to the two sides of social realities: structures and contexts as well as the ideas and interpretive processes (Pitrim Sorokin's distinction) in the form of a 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973) using 'emic' language of the former and 'etic' language of the latter – or more simply, by triangulating between how the participants see what they are doing and how the research sees what they are doing (Guzmán-Valenzuela, 2016).

A choice of exploratory, inductive and qualitative research paradigm required transparency in moving between the holistic case analysis through the processes of comparing and contrasting the cases in order to arrive at a broader conclusion that provided a generalised answer while acknowledging the range of variants within ELE (Flick et al., 2010, p. 9). Instead of positivistic notions of reliability and validity, and besides transparency, qualitative research is judged by alternative criteria such as credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Denscombe, 2014, pp. 297–300).

### Ontology and epistemology

Pragmatist ontology, which this study was founded upon, assumes a processual nature of the reality in light of what John Dewey famously called the Spectator Theory of Knowledge. According to the pragmatist ontology, the debate between realism and interpretivism is misguided - it has even been called a 'Paradigm War' (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 1998). Against realists, pragmatism believes that the reality is ever changing, and the researcher is both affected and affecting this changing reality. However, pragmatism also rejects the subjectification of all knowledge that dominates the constructivist perspectives (Brierley, 2017; Morgan, 2014). Pragmatist ontology holds that the reality might be seen as either imminently

external or socially constructed, depending on which perspective is more useful for the particular research task, because knowledge is a product of its time and always only provisional (Denscombe, 2010, pp. 128–130).

Similarly, epistemological pragmatism is often paired with a mixed methods approach. This epistemology prioritises the research questions and calls for the ways to study the reality to be flexibly applied to those research questions. For pragmatists the value of a research does not stem from its methodological congruence, but from the value of its fruits for understanding and changing the reality. Appropriately, this study considered a range of sources to ground the research question and to contextualise and confirm the data collected through the interviews. This study was primarily based on interview data, but adopted elements of a comparative multi-method design informed by a combination of constructivist attention to the interplay between the existing organizational designs and rhetorical (or interpretivist, etc.) strategies to describe them, which together produce the cases that are the data for the study.

The revealed contested nature of the concept and the limited empirical research done on the amorphous manifestations of ELE in the past, were suggestive of the fact that flexible approach to research would be particularly beneficial to reflect the unusual design of this study. Additionally, both critical or subtle (Seale, 1999, p. 469) realism and interpretivism were seen as offering important but only limited interpretations of the reality of ELE.

For example, this study accepted that the reality is socially constructed through human interactions and therefore always open to reinterpretation (Bryman, 2012, p. 33), but it did not accept the relativist premise in which people are completely free to interpret their experiences in any way. Accordingly, this study adopted fact-checking and member checks (authorisation of the transcripts by the leaders; reactions to draft sections) (Guba and Lincoln, 1989).

This study attended to the processes of constructing the social reality through interpretations of concepts like ELE; furthermore, the researcher was seen as a partner facilitating and co-creating interpretations of different visions together with the participants. But this involvement was not seen as incompatible with the belief that constructions can be judged according to their veracity. Certain constructs are more useful for understanding reality than others. Adopting a pragmatist theory of truth, however, the constructions were not judged by their relation to the independently existing reality, but by their usefulness for understanding the object of study. Consequently, the results of this study do not only arise from the data, but from testing the tentative conclusions across a diverse range of audiences and reflecting on the results in light of the received reactions. The results of this study – the answer to the research question – will themselves be tentative, but according to pragmatists, all knowledge is.

An important additional benefit of the pragmatist ontology and mixed methods approach was an opportunity to adopt the framework of this study as it progressed. For example, this study started with an incomplete list of ELE institutions available in 2015 and incorporated a more complete definition of a population in 2017 as the ELAI database became available. The research question, originally phrased in the language of ‘aims, principles, and values’, over time gave way to an inductive exploration of conceptualisations of ELE in the cases studied, and finally the results were assessed and presented in light of the four models outlined in section 3.1.2. Analogically, data analysis of the transcripts started with the goal of thorough thematic analysis, but this goal was abandoned as the distinctiveness of each case has been revealed after the coding framework was created; a more hermeneutical analysis of the results ensued. Each of those flexibilities, potentially controversial in other research paradigms, were acceptable and in fact desirable from the perspective of pragmatist ontology and mixed methods epistemology.

### **3.2.2. STRATEGIC DECISIONS ABOUT THE DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

#### Research method: collective case study

Case study research is an increasingly popular approach offering a flexible approach to ‘small scale research with meaning’ (Tight, 2017) based on a holistic analysis of a complex and bounded case in context. A case study strives to preserve the wholeness/integrity of the case, focussing on some particular dimension of a research question (Punch, 2005, p. 153) analysed in a rigorous, theoretically informed manner from a range of sources, and importantly, it can accommodate changes in the research design during the research process (Silverman, 2013).

Case study approach suited the ontological and epistemological framework of this study well: the research question was on the one hand short, specific and answerable in principle, and on the other changed over time and was never ‘fully answerable’ (Tight, 2017, pp. 142–143). Since ELE might be seen as a highly mediated (Denscombe, 2014, p. 75), theoretical concept, most of the alternative research designs were less desirable.<sup>44</sup>

A choice of a collective case study was motivated by the general models of the research. ELE might refer to a common vision uniting particular ELE institutions as defined in section 3.1. despite the complexity and variations in its theoretical and practical interpretations. As shown in Chapter Two, ELE can be described as ‘complex, fuzzy, ambiguous and unpredictable’

<sup>44</sup> Phenomenological description, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, or a grounded theory establishing causal links would not offer the theoretical and methodological flexibility of a case study method. A multi-sited ethnography would not have those limitations and could offer much insight in the vision of ELE but given the time and resource constraints of the doctoral study was not a viable option.

(Gummesson, 2007, p. 246) and therefore it would be implausible to treat at this stage different ELE institutions as one case. But different institutions are holistic enough to be treated as cases of ELE. This study takes one further step, making not an institution but a vision for ELE an individual case to be researched from which a collective vision for ELE, if it were to be found, would be reconstructed.

Cases in the collective case study method do not necessarily have to be representative of the larger phenomenon in order to arrive at a plausible interpretation of the latter. 'Analytical generalisation through theory' from a collective case study requires that the researcher attends to the internal complexity of each case and strive to combine what is particular and what is universal about it. This study analysed disparate yet meaningful cases of ELE with an eye to contributing to the knowledge of ELE itself (Tight, 2017). This was to be achieved by discussing both the unity and variation, by providing a tentative interpretation of the patterns and connections discovered, as well as by turning potential conflicting information into a tool for a deeper understanding.

I tried to avoid bounding the case too tightly prior to fieldwork but to cautiously identify the relevant areas of comparison 'rather than forcing them into a comparative frame from the beginning' (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017, p. 63). Accordingly, this study eventually did not conceive ELE institutions as cases, but instead determined that an individual of an originator offers a better, more coherent case to be studied in this research. This was one of the examples of how the principle of contextuality shapes the case study research (Macpherson et al., 2000, p. 57); another was the critical importance of developing ways of collaborating and negotiating with research participants, who in this study were influential and informed participants who might have been assumed to have a stake in affecting the results in their favour.

This study did not fully enact the multi-scalar, multi-level analysis advocated by Bartlett and Vavrus as the method for comparative case study method but was nevertheless inspired by it. Comparative case study method rejects the typical variance-oriented or interpretivist case studies in favour of a processual approach paying 'careful, evolving, iterative attention to the contours of the research design and how boundaries perceived by participants come to be meaningful' (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017, p. 32). The principles of horizontal, vertical, and transversal comparison offer structured avenues of further research that might follow from the results of the exploratory study presented here. A reflection on those larger possibilities of research helped acknowledge the design limitations of this study, improve the questions asked in interviews and in the data analysis, and resist some cases of confirmation bias that constitutes a perennial danger of any single researcher's qualitative research.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary source for each of the case studies; their design and execution will be discussed in section 3.4. A range of secondary sources relevant for each case were consulted at various stages of the research process, among them websites, publications, marketing materials, employees, to obtain a more holistic understanding of the cases and to confirm various obtained information, especially related to dates, facts, and figures. The choice of interviews was dictated by the issues of access (most first leaders have not published much about their vision), fit with the goal of the study (understanding through comparison), and feasibility within the theoretical framework of the empirical component of this study (more than, for example, multi-sited ethnography).

A collective case study raises an issue of generalisability of the results. This study was concerned with ELE (population) but studied only selected cases of ELE (sample). A complete answer regarding which of the four models best describe the situation of ELE in general would require a complete study of (almost) all known cases. Not only would this go beyond the remit of the exploratory study, such a strategy also seemed impractical and perhaps not necessary.

In considering different models, selecting a theoretically relevant sample of ELE offered a convincing approximation of the likely (but by no means warranted) scenario at the general level. If a sample did not follow on a common vision, ELE should be seen as a misnomer unless all or some members of the sample can be excluded as mistaken or impostor forms of ELE. If, on the other hand, a sample agreed on a vision of ELE, it seems possible that ELE might be seen as either a movement (explicit vision) or a countermovement (implicit vision), as long as the selected cases are not invalidated. The crucial role for the viability of this answer was selecting a sample that would allow for such tentative generalisation; this process will be discussed in detail in section 3.3.

#### The vision of the first leader of ELE as the unit of analysis (case)

One of the fundamental dilemmas behind this study regarded the unit of analysis: should it be concerned with institutions or individuals in the first place, and what type of either. The decision to study the first leaders of ELE was motivated by the theoretical framework of the study, higher coherency and influence of their vision, and relative importance combined with limited precedence, and was further supported by the advanced aged of the first leaders.

Leaders of ELE institutions often played an important role as public promoters of the concept in its general and particular vision. Communicating and cooperating with a number of different actors, they deal with prospective, current, and former students, staff, teachers, her or his superiors, sponsors (governmental or private), accreditors, external consultants, and other leaders. They are typically responsible for a range of strategic decisions regarding the practice

of ELE: budgets, hires, guidelines, curricula, programme communication and external relations. Most often they are approved as leaders by their organisational superiors or sponsors. Throughout their tenure, they consider different ideas, motivations, contexts, and the institutional dynamics, further developing their vision of ELE in the process.

The first leaders of ELE in each institution and country offered a specific case as they were critical for the introduction of a particular vision of ELE in a new setting typically with little external support or ready-made models to be implemented. In case of the surviving institutions, they can be said to be successful academic entrepreneurs who successfully and creatively overcome major hurdles for their projects. Convincing other people to support or join their project, they gave their vision visibility and influence, and claimed a new, previously uninhabited land in the higher education landscape of a particular national or institutional setting. By virtue of being first, they had the longest time to reflect and perfect their vision, even though most of them have not published extensively about it. Not a single one of them attended a liberal arts institution themselves, which made the question of their vision of pioneering European developments even more complex and fascinating.

Apart from the issues of importance, the first leaders were also easily identifiable as sources and accustomed to being interviewed, which made them more accessible. Yet this accessibility also had a time limit, related to the advanced age of many retired first leaders, which increased the priority of studying their visions beyond documentary sources. Those who already retired might have been assumed to offer a vision that would more honestly reflect on the hopes and results of their actions. All first leaders, however, could have been incentivised to participate in this study to advance the knowledge of ELE and to make sure they play a role in its reception.

There were important limitations related to the study of first leaders. The term is not precise as it assumes a set of core competencies and ultimate responsibility for the vision of a particular ELE programme to be exhausted in just one person. The concept of leadership also assigns the ultimate responsibility for the institutional success to the individual rather than to a collective or circumstances. Furthermore, by selecting first leaders as the source for studying a common vision of ELE, this study made an 'educated guess' that each first leader had a vision or could produce one in the process. And, lastly, it assumed that the first leaders could be trusted to provide such a vision in a fundamentally honest way that can be treated as data for the research study. Other limitations related to the study of the first leaders will be discussed in section 6.1.

Even with these caveats, the first leaders' visions of ELE were seen as the best available source for an empirical study. They were selected as the unit of analysis, or a case, in an exploratory

collective case study of the vision of ELE. The next step required identifying the visions which would be most relevant for this study.

### **3.3. DATA SELECTION**

This section explains the steps taken in proceeding from the level of population (visions of all first leaders of ELE) to the sample level (8 first leaders in 8 countries selected for the study). It discusses the sampling criteria, its limitations, and significance of the sample. Finally, it covers some important aspects of knowledge regarding the selected cases that was garnered before the data collection began.

#### **3.3.1. SAMPLING STRATEGY AND ITS LIMITATIONS**

As discussed in section 2.1, the ELAI database serves as the catalogue of ELE institutions delineating a population of this study. After excluding entries related to American Universities (1.b) and organisations promoting ELE (3.b), this means that the population included 84 first leaders.

Qualitative research relates cases to the population through logical inference, rather than statistical generalisation (Small, 2009), and for this reason the sample selected must be first and foremost trustworthy avenue for studying the larger phenomenon (Guba, 1981). The approach used here aimed to assure breadth and depth of the visions across the cases studied, and thus achieve a sample that is both meaningful and heterogenous (Tight, 2017).

Criterion-based sampling was used: two criteria assured relevance:

- Country-level selection: being the first leader of the first ELE institution in the country (18 cases left);<sup>45</sup>
- Five-years rule: being the first leader of a programme operating for at least five years when the study started in 2015. This criterion allowed the included institutions to pass at least two full cohorts of students through an equivalent of a bachelor's programme, growing and settling on the vision in the process (14 programmes left).<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup> This count counts EHU in Belarus (1992-2004) and in Vilnius (2005-) as one institution, but in two different countries. Institutions like ECLA/BCB that moved between categories or had complicated governance history had been counted as operating continuously in the current category for the sampling purposes.

<sup>46</sup> Four programmes excluded by this criterion were: Course on General Studies at the University of Lisbon in Portugal, Core Curriculum at University of Navarra in Spain, Programme in Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Malta, and Chavagnes Studium in France.

Three additional criteria assured viability:

- Institutional survival: continued operation of the programme during the study (2015-2019);
- Academic recognition: accreditation as a degree-granting programme or equivalent;<sup>47</sup>
- Individual survival: the first leader is still alive.

Viability criteria were seen as important but did not reduce the number of cases to be studied.

The final selection from 14 programmes matching the sampling criteria to 8 cases analysed in this study was reflective of the limitations of knowledge and practical considerations. When the study was designed in 2015, I was simply only aware of the 8 programmes selected for this study. Because of the complex organisational arrangements as well as unclear information about some of those programmes in the previous databases, most notably Godwin (2013), I was unable to confirm that the six remaining institutions matched the above criteria. This applied to Vytautas Magnus University in Lithuania, Kampus Kortrijk of Leuven University in Belgium, Tallinn University in Estonia, International Theological Institute in Vienna, University of Cyprus, and Faculty of Humanities at Charles University in the Czech Republic.

The latter case was exceptional: without firm knowledge about the case, I nevertheless reached out by email to its first leader, who was then retiring, but received no response so could not include him in the sample. When the ELAI database was created in 2017 and later the entries were confirmed by the listed institutions, the data collection had already been concluded.

Every qualitative sample is limited, and this was in at least three principal ways. First, the visions of the first leaders of the six institutions matching the criteria that were not included should not be assumed to be of lesser value for the study of ELE. Secondly, the prioritisation of the first leader of the first institution reflects an assumption that the difficulty of the introduction offers a more promising context for the study of the vision of ELE than conscious innovation in an established setting, which is only an assumption. Lastly, while the virtue of being the first might suggest that other ELE institutions are followers or at least positioning themselves against the first one, this did not have to necessarily be the case.<sup>48</sup> Further

<sup>47</sup> MISH at the University of Warsaw, Poland, does not award degrees itself, but is accredited as a separate course of study. Additionally, since 2007 the first leader of MISH also directs an accredited 2.a programme at the same university.

<sup>48</sup> In the Netherlands, the first institution can be said to have established a model followed by the others (source Adriaansens/Dekker), even if the 'followers' have adapted and changed this model; but in

limitations of this sample relate to the generalisability of the results and will be discussed in section 6.1

Given the processual nature of reality purported by the pragmatist ontology, it is impossible to offer a fully objective description of the world: no sample and no study of the whole population can offer something comparable to the positivistic notion of facts. Furthermore, qualitative research rejects the possibility of assessing the quality of the sample before the study is conducted (Tight, 2017, p. 144). Together, those two theoretical limitations mean that there is no 'ideal' sample and no perfect way of conducting the research. This situation calls for a continued reflection on the data by asking, for example, how the first leaders saw an invitation to participate in this study, were they more inclined to isomorphism or originality in how they presented their visions, and how much did they know about the visions of the other participants.

With these caveats, the eight selected cases were seen as manageable, meaningful, and diverse enough to conduct a collective case study. In ELAI parlance, the sample included three 2A, two 2B, two 1A and one 3A institutions. Four institutions were from the formerly Communist and four from the Western countries. The first leaders of all selected institutions agreed to participate in this study.

the UK, which is the largest ELE 'market', this dynamics did not apply. The extent to which ECLA was seen as a German institution and therefore as a benchmark for the new ELE developments coming later might also be questioned.

### 3.3.2. INFORMATION ON THE SAMPLE

Table 6 below summarises some basic information about the first leaders studied.

*Table 6. First leaders of ELE analysed in this study*

| Full name                | Born | Discipline          | First ELE founded   | Years active | Country         | ELAI institution type | Language              | Ownership |
|--------------------------|------|---------------------|---|--------------|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------|
| <b>Hans Adriaansens</b>  | 1946 | Sociology           | University College Utrecht – Utrecht University                                       | 1998-2013    | The Netherlands | 3A --> 2A             | English               | Public    |
| <b>Anatoli Mikhailov</b> | 1939 | Philosophy          | European Humanities University  | 1992-        | Belarus         | 3A (or 1A)            | Belarussian / Russian | Private   |
| <b>Jerzy Axer</b>        | 1946 | Classical Philology | College of Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in the Humanities -- University of Warsaw | 1993-        | Poland          | 3A --> 2A             | Polish                | Public    |
| <b>Samuel Abrahám</b>    | 1960 | Political science   | Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts                                       | 2006-        | Slovakia        | 3A --> 1A             | English               | Private   |
| <b>Nikolay Kopusov</b>   | 1955 | History             | Smolny College -- Saint Petersburg State University                                   | 1999-2009    | Russia          | 2A                    | Russian               | Public    |
| <b>Leif Borgert</b>      | 1943 | Economics           | University College Gotland  | 2003-2008    | Sweden          | 2B                    | Swedish               | Public    |
| <b>Thomas Nørgaard</b>   | 1972 | Philosophy          | European College of Liberal Arts  | 2002-2013    | Germany         | 1A (moved to 3A)      | English               | Private   |
| <b>Nigel Tubbs</b>       | 1961 | Philosophy          | Modern Liberal Arts Programme -- University of Winchester                             | 2010-        | England         | 2B                    | English (UK)          | Public    |

Sampling was designed to offer a meaningfully diverse set of approaches of ELE (to test the models related to a common vision). The diversity of the individuals as educators, which will now be discussed, provide further arguments for the possible diversity of the visions selected for this study. Unless specified otherwise, the data in this subsection come from the first leaders' biographies and e-mail communication.

#### Time considerations

Participants' age ranged from 44 to 77; four of the participants were in their seventies at the time interviews were conducted in 2017. The second date in the table above reflects the year in which their first ELE programme or its direct predecessor started.

A 'year of engagement' was proposed as a soft measure of the year in which a first leader started seriously considering the introduction of an ELE programme. This moment was estimated based on the data collected from the interviews and additional questions to some of the participants. Those ranged between 1991 to 2002 and in one case, 2009. This means that two leaders were 30 and 35 when first engaged with the idea of liberal education, four were in

their forties, and the oldest ones were 52 and 56, respectively. Between 10 and 27 years had passed between the year of engagement and the interview, possibly augmenting the benefits of hindsight but hindering the reliability of memory.

Light green bars in the Figure 13 below cover the years between the year of engagement and the moment in which the ELE was established (first students enrolled, or, in one case, the curricular reform enacted). Solid green bars represent the tenure as a leader of ELE, while yellow bars represent 'engaged retirement'. While all eight participants were simultaneously leaders in 2008 only, seven were active in various capacities in the 2002-2008 period, and six continue to be engaged with ELE until today.

*Figure 2. Timeline of first leaders' years of engagement*

|             | 1990 | 1991 | 1992 | 1993 | 1994 | 1995 | 1996 | 1997 | 1998 | 1999 | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 |
|-------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| Abrahám     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Adriaansens |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Axer        |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Borgert     |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Kopossov    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Mikhailov   |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Nørgaard    |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
| Tubbs       |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |

The time overlap between their engagement does not mean all leaders were aware of, let alone in contact, agreement, or cooperation with each other. Based on the analysis of the relations known to me prior to the interviews and the interview materials, of the 28 possible relations between the eight leaders, 15-18 represented awareness of another leader's existence. Of those, 5 were friendly (history of contacts/cooperation; positive perception), 5 can be termed 'friendly distance' (limited cooperation, neutral perception); 3 are distanced (no cooperation; stated differences); 2 were ambiguous (no cooperation; unclear perception). Not a single leader was unconnected to any other leader, one had only one connection, and only one leader was aware of all the others, having the biggest number of friendly connections (4).

### Academic qualifications

Three leaders defended their doctoral thesis in their twenties (25, 26 and 27 respectively), three at 30 or 31, one at 40, and one at 53 after a professional career outside academia. One of the leaders got involved with ELE before he received his PhD.

Seven leaders defended their PhD in the humanities and the social sciences: philosophy (3), sociology and political science (2), classics (1) and history (1); the outstanding leader obtained a degree in organisation theory (economy).

All leaders had published at least one scholarly output related to their ELE before this study commenced.

### Geography

At some point in their education, 7 leaders studied in their country of origin, four have studied abroad. Two defended their PhD abroad. Four of the five first leaders who have stayed abroad as students or researchers did so in an Anglo-Saxon country. Neither have studied in a liberal arts institution in the US or abroad.

Only one started ELE outside of their country of origin -- in fact twice. One leader was forced to re-establish his institution in exile. During the interview, five lived in their home country.

Cases selected for the study were scattered between Eastern and Western Europe, with a notable omission of Southern Europe (which was not intentional). Only two of the seven ELE programmes studied were offered in English (the UK was excluded from this count); one became English-taught institution in 2016.

### International cooperation

Four leaders from Eastern Europe counted among the members of the AL Steering Committee (1997-2001), sponsored by the Educational Leadership Program (ELP) of the NY-based Endeavor Foundation. Of those, three were invited to ELP seminars in the US, a week-long retreat for the presidents, deans, or trustees of American liberal arts colleges. Three (two former members of Artes Liberales Association, and formed co-dean of ECLA) continue to receive support for their initiatives from the same foundation until today.

Five of the leaders have conducted study visits and meetings with college officials in the US. Two officially collaborated with Bard College, one led an ELE later acquired by Bard (this leader left the institution at the time of the acquisition). Two leaders collaborated with sectoral organisations based in the US<sup>49</sup> (ACTC and GLAA respectively). In total, five leaders have secured financial support for their programmes from sources abroad.

<sup>49</sup> Association of Core Texts and Courses, and Global Liberal Arts Alliance, respectively.

Overall, according to the pre-study analysis, none of the leaders was particularly well known in the educational circles outside of their country at the time the interviews were conducted.

### Role

The official job titles of the first leaders were diverse and sometimes changed during their tenure, but they were all the highest ranked members of the administration of a particular ELE: a programme leader, dean, rector, or a president. At least six remained active in research and at least six taught at their institution during their time in administration.

At the time of an interview, four remained in their original role based on which they were selected for the study, one moved to another ELE, one went into retirement without severing his connections to ELE, and two had no remaining active connection to ELE.

Five of the eight have either seen their programmes transformed into another ELAI category or moved institutions themselves (or both). Three started their second ELE programme before, two were actively pursuing the creation of a further programme at the time of interview. At least two were actively involved in international cooperation between ELEs.

## **3.4. DATA COLLECTION**

This section discusses the data, especially the role of the interview as a method of knowledge generation in this project. It also covers the procedures, including the rationale behind not anonymising leaders, the topic guide and piloting, as well as the execution of the actual interviews before discussing the transcription and authorisation process. Finally, it addresses other ethical and power relations issues, the double role of supervisors who were also subjects of the study. As typical in qualitative research, the data collection and data analysis phases were not strictly separated, as the analysis started even before the interview, and feedback loops generated new knowledge long after the interview was concluded.

### **3.4.1. INTERVIEWS: PHILOSOPHY AND PROCEDURE**

From the outset of the design process, it was decided that interviews would be the primary method of generating data about the vision of ELE. With only several individuals who can count as first leaders of ELE, methods typically used for large-N studies (for example surveys) appeared less appropriate since they provide generalisations rather than more granular analysis. But the decision to use interviews was also dictated by the quality of the field, the broad nature of the research question, and the ambition to capture the unity and diversity of

ELE that underlies declared opinions and perceptions. On the one hand, studying a vision does not easily conform to the fragmented methodology of survey questionnaires, as there are no fast rules about how particular answers can add up to a vision that can be later compared to other visions. On the other hand, statistical prominence of some answers cannot be automatically equated with theoretical importance, even if one surveyed all leaders of ELE. It is of course possible to use features and functions suggested by the literature on ELE (Chapter 2) and compare the picture provided by the scholars with the ones of practitioners. To do so would, however, constitute a different study aiming to confirm or falsify existing hypotheses rather than explore the emergent field and adapt to specificity of different cases while looking for a grounded answer. Achieving the latter required a more flexible and dialogical tool, therefore the interviews were chosen as the most suitable tool for data collection.

Interviews facilitate an intellectual creation through exchange, allow for a deep probing of perceptions (Rubin and Rubin, 1995) and are more rewarding for participants even if they take relatively longer given the ability to shape not just particular results but the structure of the final research outcomes.

A semi-structured protocol seemed particularly helpful for the study of a vision of ELE trying to balance theoretical goals of the study with 'the processual nature of conversation and the social dimensions of knowledge production' (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017, p. 55).<sup>50</sup> All interviews used the same topic guide as a springboard for a period of collaboration in generating data: during the interview, in the follow-up questions, during the authorisation of transcriptions and later the final approval of leaders' sections from Chapter Four. In this enlarged understanding, on the one hand the interviews were a 'knowledge construction project' (Holstein and Gubrium, 2008, pp. 151–156) where the first leaders and the researcher were 'co-constructing the encounter' (King and Horrocks, 2010, p. 134). On the other hand, there were multiple opportunities to add data from other sources and to occasionally to check the constructions from the interviews against them. The idea was to turn contextuality of the interview data from a shortcoming into an asset: where the interview is to some extent a learning arena for better understanding the other and themselves, and any generate knowledge is benchmarked against previous expertise of all involved (Bygstad and Munkvold, 2011; Macpherson et al., 2000, p. 57). This was motivated by the conceptualisation of a vision discussed in section 3.1.

<sup>50</sup> Unstructured interviews were not considered as risky for the quality and amount of the data collected, especially given that the first leaders were trained participants for similar exercises and could have assumed control over the process. At the same time, a fully structured interview runs at the risk of a confirmation bias and/or producing superficial data consisting of socially approved ways of speaking of liberal education.

This participatory co-generative approach to interviewing served a triple purpose: it allowed the first leaders to assume ownership of the transcripts as representative of their vision, and provided avenues for clarifications and elaborations, both regarding the facts and opinions and the ways those were presented in the sections. Given the limited nature of the interview and often limited knowledge and trust of the interviewer before, the collaborative, extended approach to interviewing as a process rather than a product was seen as particularly beneficial for the quality of data generated. Although the level of cooperativeness of the eight first leaders differed, the relevant feedback loops were created, and all provided helpful contributions beyond the interview itself. Establishing a relationship with each leader allowed to correct some of the obvious mistakes in the initial data and generated new understandings. Epistemic inequality was a relevant concern for the study of first leaders who by virtue of their position have more power, knowledge, and higher position than the PhD student interviewing them. In many ways they were difficult participants – trained analytical thinkers and public speakers. Furthermore, the nature of the interviews about their individual vision encouraged them to present it with ‘linearity, teleology, and coherence’ (Munro, 1998). The role of a researcher was both to seek an equal ground and to gently highlight any discrepancies and silences; this approach was not uncontroversial but produced satisfactory results.

The interview procedure offered each leader an opportunity to present, defend, and elaborate on their vision of ELE. At the beginning of each interview, leaders were given the chance to present their vision on their own terms; as the interview progressed, they were increasingly probed and at times challenged by the interviewer who directed the conversation to cover the areas of interest with as little disruption to its flow as possible. This active role of the interviewer was motivated by the privilege of the leaders: they were interviewed on the topic they have certainly rehearsed many times in the past, in the physical setting familiar to them, by a young researcher. Since the academic setting values a cultured debate, and the leaders knew they would be able to retract or rephrase their opinions in the future, this was seen as a chance to increase the quality of the data rather than to hinder it. Building the atmosphere of respect and trust allowed for the asking of more venturous questions that produced bolder responses.

The interview protocol effectively granted the first leaders ‘extensive control over how the conversation develop[ed]’ (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017, pp. 54–55), allowing them to attempt (usually successfully) to push a discussion into topics they wanted to cover and to more fully express ambivalences and mixed reactions sparked by the questions. The interview did not require much preparation on their side to begin with, and this concession further increased the likelihood of their future cooperation that was critical for the success of this study.

Admittedly, a flexible approach to interviewing was also more attractive to me, making the data collection to consist primarily of an engaging conversation with relevant and diverse social actors about our concerns and experiences. Furthermore, some new questions – asked in the interviews or in the later communication – arose from the interviews in a way that was only possible in a flexible, semi-structured protocol.

The interviewing philosophy of this study was finally inspired by the phenomenological tradition of a long interview, the romantic paradigm, and ethnomethodology. A long interview (McCracken, 1988) approach identifies theoretical and cultural categories before constructing the topic guide, whereas the analysis moves from the cultural categories to theoretical theses based on interview data.<sup>51</sup> The ‘romantic paradigm’ conceptualises the researcher as an ‘active midwife’ to allow interviewees to reveal their true self (Brinkmann, 2013, p. 12). To counter the danger of naivete of the romantic paradigm, I have also included elements of the ethnomethodological tradition (Garfinkel, 1984), for example by denaturalising categories of speech. In this case, ‘liberal education’ and ‘liberal arts’ were subjected to questioning attitude, turned into a dependent variable, to expose and understand the rules of interaction through strange-making.<sup>52</sup>

All leaders agreed to participate, validate the transcript, responded with comments to the draft section, and did not raise issues with the study procedures and goals. The complete general procedure of interviewing the first leaders included the following steps that will now be elaborated upon:

1. Identifying the first leader, through documents of the program;
2. Introducing the project and its aims to the leader via email;
3. Sending the project information sheet upfront and establishing the date of the interview;
4. Briefing, obtaining written informed consent and conducting an in-person recorded interview using the topic guide with the first leader;

<sup>51</sup> A long interview ‘gives us access to individuals without violating their privacy or testing their patience. It allows us to capture the data needed for penetrating qualitative analysis without participant observation, unobtrusive observation, or prolonged contact. It allows us, in other words, to achieve crucial qualitative objectives within a manageable methodological context’ (McCracken, 1988, p. 11).

<sup>52</sup> Another connection was the ‘taboo game’ in which, at the beginning of the interview, I attempted to not use the core categories myself to see if the leaders can explain what the first leaders wanted educationally without resorting to the topic and at which point they would raise it. The feasibility of this practice differed between the interviews, and admittedly, the consent form already prompted this category anyway.

5. Sharing the transcription of the interview along with additional questions to unclear parts or requests for additional materials; the leaders were allowed at this stage to cut out the pieces they were not comfortable with;
6. Acknowledging the receipt of the final transcription for an analysis;
7. Sharing the draft section of Chapter Four with each leader asking for factual corrections, differing interpretations, and any additional opinions they would like to add.

#### **3.4.2. PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET, CONSENT FORM, LACK OF ANONYMITY**

All leaders decided to participate in the study after reviewing the Project Information Sheet (Appendix 4) providing an overview of the goals of the study framed in the language of 'aims, principles, and values', and describing the role of the leaders as 'the »heart« of the movement'. In detailed description of the procedures and university ethics approval it followed the good practices of social research: informed consent, safety, right to withdrawal (Tight, 2017, p. 151) but, importantly, it did not promise anonymity.

Anonymity was not be practically and theoretically possible in this study (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2018, p. 21). The first leader is the most visible position of an ELE, and to effectively anonymise them, not only their name and affiliation, but country, language, and references would have to be anonymised as well. Doing so would invalidate the goal of the study since a contextualised, holistic vision of ELE would no longer be possible. A non-anonymous interview offered a middle ground between the self-authored, approved publication of the leader and fully confidential conversation; as such, it provided a good fit for the semi-public character of individual vision. None of the leaders questioned such a non-anonymous interview.

Before the beginning of each interview, a leader received a printed project information sheet and a consent form (Appendix 5) containing an overview of critical information, especially regarding the lack of anonymity and procedures. Signed originals remain in the project archive.

#### **3.4.3. INITIAL ASSUMPTIONS, TOPIC GUIDE AND PILOTING**

This study begun with an idea of comparing the aims, principles, and values of the first leaders, and the topic guide (Appendix 6) was created accordingly. This approach and the construction of the topic guide reflected both the personal experience and the initial motivation of the

researcher to study the topic (see Preface), but also the early attempt to compare the sample based only on the website descriptions (see the results in Appendix 3).

In preparation for this study, I have conducted more than 30 formal and informal interviews with the faculty and administrators from both private and public liberal arts institutions in the US. The interviews took place in Winter and Summer of 2015 in Washington, DC, New York, NY, Boston, MA and Keene, NH. Interviews in the US were partially a natural direction for somebody interested in contemporary liberal education, given the colourful and vast scene of organisations, institutions, and individuals committed to the idea. They also allowed me to practice interviewing skills with often highly-positioned interviewees that in some respects turned out similar to the first leaders (which I had not known back then). The interviews were semi-structured around the question of the meaning of liberal arts education both in general terms and in the context of colleges or other institutions the interviewees came from.

Beyond an exploration of a common topic that informed the research question of this study, those early interviews had additional value as foundation for this research project. Individuals leading the emergence of liberal arts in Europe had naturally been looking to the US, either through readings or by visiting colleges of liberal arts and sciences in the US. Evidence of this inspiration can be found already in the early literature on ELE (Abrahám, 2012a; Harward, 2007; Mehrens, 2006; Rothblatt, 2003). I decided, however, not to include those interviews or conduct further interviews in the US for two principal reasons. One, it would not be feasible, within a PhD, to explore both the US and European liberal arts scene. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it is not clear how a more complete understanding of the dynamics of the liberal arts in the US would have contributed to the answer to a research question concerning the vision behind liberal arts in Europe. ELE scene is different from the US, organisationally for sure and likely also conceptually, and as such deserves to be studied on its own terms.

Secondly, the vision of ELE cannot be easily compared and contrasted to the common American vision, because the latter – as noted by Kimball, Rothblatt, and many others – does not exist. For those reasons, I have eventually decided to delineate this study as concerning only ELE and drawing from the interview material generated on this side of the Atlantic.

The assumptions about ELE evolved during the study, and multiple memos were created throughout the process: after each interview, during the transcription process, and early on during the data analysis phase. As discussed in Section 3.2.1., the initial framework of aims, principles, and values was abandoned as too rigid and deductive and was eventually replaced by the theoretical framework discussed in section 3.1. Given the flexible approach to interviewing and similar general orientation, the fact that the topic guide reflected the

questions about aims, principles, and values was not seen as a hindrance to the success of the study.

At the beginning of each interview, I presented myself as investigating the potential diversity of educational aims, practical principles, and underlying values of liberal education in Europe – and that to that end I was interested in reconstructing the history of ELEs, personal visions, boundaries, labels, and opinions about liberal education developments. The introductory part reminded the participants about the expected time, recording, and non-anonymity.

The topic guide included knowledge questions, opinion and value questions, and background and demographic questions (LeCompte and Preissle, 2003, p. 171) and consisted of two parts. In the first part I was asking a series of direct questions designed to elicit self-descriptions of their institutions by contextualised statements regarding motivations, plans or strategies, external reactions to those plans, and the ultimate effects of their educational actions. Some questions related to the hopes for the programme (aims) and the organisational, pedagogical, and curricular aspects of the programme (means), while others related to their ideals of a student, teacher, and the classroom experience. The leaders were asked how their programme differed from non-liberal education.

In the second part, I asked a range of less direct questions about the difference, uniqueness, target group, financing, and opinions on other programmes. I was also posing probing questions about the preferred label used in particular ELE, various assumptions stated in the literature on liberal education in Europe. The interview protocol concluded with an evaluative/reflective part on the development of the program.

This topic guide was piloted during a test interview in June 2016 at an ELAI-listed institution that would have matched the sampling criteria except for being the first ELE in the country. The interviewed leader of this programme runs it ever since founding it a decade earlier. Piloting allowed for confirmation of the timing, rephrasing of the leading questions, and to practice the interviewing skills related to this study, especially the balancing act between the abstract structure of the topic guide, the specificity of the program, and the flow of the conversation. The high costs of travel and the challenging timeframe of the study made it impossible to expand the piloting. While different from interviewing the first leaders with major national statures, piloting offered important lessons about the task and the dynamics of interaction. The material from the pilot interview is not included in the results.

In the proper interviews, the topic guide was used in a flexible manner, primarily to ensure that all relevant questions are asked in each interview. The order of the questions differed, and some of them were paraphrased to better match the specificity of organisational

arrangement. Probing, clarifying, and digressive questions not included in the topic guide were added as the interviewer saw fit; questions already answered in connection to a previous topic were not asked again. Occasionally, the interviewer shared his experiences to elicit a sharing attitude among the leaders. As a result, each interview differed in length, topics covered, and distribution of attention between various parts of the topic guide; this diversity added to the authenticity of interaction and improved the communication with leaders afterwards.

#### **3.4.4. CONDUCTING INTERVIEWS**

The interviews took place between June 2016 and January 2017. Appendix 7 offers the list of interviews and the timeline of later procedures. Most interviews were conducted in English and lasted between 1.5 and 3 hours. Where more than one person was interviewed for the case, all quotes were presented with clear attribution.<sup>53</sup> Jerzy Axer's interview was conducted in Polish.<sup>54</sup>

Early interviews were marked by more activity of the interviewer than the latter, which was a sign of improved practice in interviewing. While early interviews included more anecdotes and note-taking, both practices were later abandoned, while requests for clarifications and examples increased. The exception was noting any emphases or non-verbal cues. Overall, I became more reflexive of how knowledge 'is socially produced through meaningful interaction' (Bartlett and Vavrus, 2017b, p. 56) as the interview progressed.

Conducting interviews with first leaders raises the issue of composure: to what extent the power differential between an accomplished academic and a PhD student combined with the opportunity to prepare a version of the vision in advance and review afterwards can distort the data collection process. To a certain extent allowing the leaders to exert a degree of

<sup>53</sup> Anatoly Mikhailov, who at the time of interview was running his private university, first refused to participate and then agreed to meet but scheduled only about 40 minutes for the interview. Not counting introductions, the recorded material was only about 30 minutes long. Mikhailov asked his long-time collaborator, Ryhor Miniankou, to continue the interview later that day. Both Mikhailov and Miniankou sent multiple additional materials later, and Mikhailov agreed to answer additional questions in writing. Especially the latter made the interaction more informative and helped overcome the language barrier.

Nikolay Kopusov had only been identified for this study in summer 2016 as neither the website nor the academic publications of Smolny College mentioned his name. Located in Atlanta, GA, Kopusov was interviewed in January 2017 together with Dina Khapaeva, who played an important part in Smolny as well. During a two-day visit I held extensive talks with both Kopusov and Khapaeva and thus produced complementary perspectives.

<sup>54</sup> Both Axer and myself are native Polish speakers and this was Axer's preference. The interview was made over Skype, instead of in person, since a personal meeting had to be cancelled on short notice. Axer spoke with me on two occasions a week apart. Over 5 hours of material was recorded.

control over the interview was important part of the motivation and perhaps even a condition of access; at the same time, the variance in the initial coherence and the degree of post-interview interventions shows that not all leaders paid equal attention to maintaining composure. Since the vision as defined in this study makes no claim about the past (what they were actually thinking when they started) but about the present (what they think they wanted all along), this is less of a fundamental problem. The possible distortion has likely provided more, rather than less, coherence to the reconstructed visions, but did not imply an increased coherence between the visions, If there was a common way of composing the vision of ELE among the leaders, one could question to what extent the execution made it impossible to answer the research question; the results however show that it was not the case.

Within a few hours after each interview, I wrote a memo about the encounter, noting my first impressions on the content obtained as well as the questions to be answered in the future. Those memos should be treated as rudimentary stages of the data analysis as much as they were improving data collection. Where covering some questions was not feasible during the interview, or where new questions arose after the original interview, they were raised in subsequent email exchanges wherever necessary.

#### **3.4.5. PREPARATION OF THE TRANSCRIPT**

Transcriptions began in the Fall 2016, before all interviews were conducted. During the transcribing process, memos on the complex issues arising were composed as necessary. In the transcript file, all non-extensive comments or requests of clarification have been noted. Transcript files were saved according to leaders' names.

The full content of each recording was transcribed verbatim;<sup>55</sup> a first batch was transcribed by the researcher, the remaining ones by an external service. All draft transcriptions were proofread by the interviewer alongside the recording and notes from the interviews. This also offered an opportunity to mark any points of interest in the internal comments. Even if the leader mentioned something as off the record, it was transcribed to allow the leader to determine themselves how much of a questionable passage they deemed inadmissible.

Rules for transcription followed for the most part the established practice of the social sciences (Kuckartz, 2014, pp. 125–126). Transcripts were slightly edited for clarity and the standards of the written prose. Pauses were marked by parentheses (...), emphases were

<sup>55</sup> Complex notation, as used in conversational analysis or linguistic analysis, was deemed unnecessarily complex given the goals of the project. It would also make the authorisation procedure more difficult, especially for non-native speakers of English, which was the majority of the sample.

marked by CAPITAL LETTERS, false starts were removed, respondent's reactions during questions were noted where possible. All disruptions to the process were noted and explained; non-verbal activities and unintelligible passages were noted in the parentheses. Additions coming from the interviewer were noted in square brackets to make the sentence intelligible without the context. Irrelevant passages (debriefing, off-topic conversations) were removed from the version shared with leaders. Transcriptions were formatted as Word files. The version shared with the leader via email had comments either elaborated into specific questions or removed where not relevant for the authorisation process. This document was accompanied by a one-page long 'instruction' file (see Appendix 9 for a template) explaining the transcription procedures used, the role of the comments, and asking for a careful review of the text. In this message leaders were asked to produce their current CV alongside any additional materials mentioned during the interview or otherwise helpful for the analysis. The leaders provided their publications, sometimes also notes or unpublished materials, and some relevant media coverage; those materials helped build leaders' profiles and were helpful in data analysis for each case.

The last point of this message assured the leader they can remove any passage they did not wish to be analysed. Few leaders asked if the transcripts would be published in full anywhere: I assured them this won't happen, and that quotations from the transcripts would be further edited to fit the context of the narrative without distorting their original intention.

#### **3.4.6. AUTHORISATION OF THE TRANSCRIPT**

Authorisation was crucial for maintaining informed consent in a non-anonymous study. It allowed the leaders to assume ownership of the interview material as reflective of their vision and to further elaborate on it. From an ethical perspective, the procedure limited the exposure risk for the leaders by allowing them to determine how much of the materials they want to have analysed, and to correct any passage they felt did not reflect their intentions.

The message from Appendix 9 stated that not returning a corrected transcript within the deadline would be treated as acceptance for the current file. Of the ten interviews, nine authorised transcripts were returned. Jerzy Axer, whose transcript was also the longest, chose not to comment on the transcript, but swiftly returned his section of the dissertation.

On average, the approved transcripts were ca. 83% of the length of the originals sent for authorisation. The scope and character of changes varied between leaders and have been noted in separate memos. The shortest transcript was the most thoroughly changed, with the quality of English and amount of relevant content vastly improving in the process. Most of the questions have been answered during email exchanges. In some cases, leaders have returned

the transcript for another revision, but all approved the final document. Only the final version was analysed.

#### **3.4.7. COLLABORATION AFTER THE APPROVAL OF TRANSCRIPTS**

The last phase of data collection happened already during advanced data analysis once the coding framework was developed and sections on each case were drafted according to this framework. This phase relied strongly on the exercise of judgement. The researcher and the leaders were involved in the balancing act between the holistic needs of an individual case and the structural qualities of a comparative study. For this reason, the basic analysis had to be concluded before the leaders were engaged again.

Draft sections (intended for Chapter Four) were shared with each leader in reaction to the ask from two participants to provide them with the quotation in full context for final review. Not wanting to discriminate against the others and having seen a productive use of this practice in a study by Grant and Riesman (1978), I shared draft sections with all leaders.

This practice replaced the originally planned follow-up interview as similar in function and more feasible given the timeline of the study. Feedback received at this stage further improved the quality of the data and elevated the aspects of co-creation. The message appended to draft sections solicited any factual corrections, stylistic improvements, and dissenting interpretations. As the commented sections were being returned, corrections (mostly related to complex organisational arrangements) and language tweaks were all implemented; suggestions for deletions were reviewed on a case by case basis. Reading those sections, leaders were unaware of the cross-case analysis and overall conclusions of the study.

### **3.5. DATA ANALYSIS**

This section covers the preparation of the material, coding framework, and the phases of data analysis.

The analysis was designed to answer the question whether the accounts of individual visions of ELE generated through interviews have enough in common to warrant thinking about the first leaders as a movement – and eventually to determine which of the four models discussed in 3.1.2. most persuasively describes the situation of ELE. This meant that the data analysis would have two distinctive modes of understanding ELE: reconstructing each case as coherently as possible on its own terms; and comparing those understandings between each other on the

terms developed for this study. The first called for a hermeneutical approach, the latter was more compatible with a version of thematic analysis.

### **3.5.1. PREPARATIONS AND EARLY ANALYSIS**

In qualitative research, the data analysis begins alongside the data collection, so already preparing for the interviews and preparing memos throughout the interviewing process I have been engaged in the early theorisations. During the transcriptions, I made note of the emerging connections and areas requiring further explorations on my own or in collaboration with the leaders.

The approved transcripts were uploaded to NVIVO for coding. Coding was understood as creating categories that reduce the complexity of the collected data. I have coded the relevant passages inductively through interpretive coding without any particular theoretical framework for the study at this stage. The transcripts were also analysed formally for length and speed (words per minute).

Initially, the Qualitative Text Analysis approach was used as an inspiration as it allows to connect 'hermeneutical understanding of the text with role-governed coding' (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 159). In this stage, the raw interview data were transformed into meaningful findings for added transparency and trustworthiness (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 12) through a series of methodologically controlled steps. Qualitative text analysis describes and conceptualises the material by compressing the data into a profile matrix. The profile matrix is a heuristic model which uses cases (persons) as rows, and topics as columns. The relevant interview passages are assigned to a proper cell, while passages that are irrelevant from the point of view of the study are discarded. This general approach was guiding the early stage of the data analysis.

I first re-read the approved transcripts to highlight the most relevant of otherwise interesting passages. This gave me a general overview of the dataset before the coding. In the next steps, the transcripts were read in a targeted manner to create case summaries containing the keywords, core phrases, and mottos for each case, staying close to the original materials. Each case summary also included a short description of the motivation, the role of context, the understanding of the concept and opinion on its unitary character as well as the subjective relevance of the concept of liberal education in the educational vision studied. The goal of case summaries was to better understand each leader on their own terms and test some of the ideas for potential categories.

In the next phase, I created the categories in a deductive-inductive manner (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 62).<sup>56</sup> Early versions of the main themes or ‘big categories’ of ELE were based on the topic guide, research questions, and notes from the interviews. The early version of the coding framework was tested on two cases and subsequently tweaked. The categories in the coding framework were not disjunctive and exhaustive: some of the passages were coded in up to three subcategories. This phase helped identify four topics emerging prominently from the transcripts of loosely structured interviews: personal inspiration, context, practices, and theories of liberal education. They became the main categories within which I started to inductively code all interview data. In this process some of the categories were merged, some split, and a residual category was added in each main category.

Single coder coding, as applied in this study, is prone for the researched influence, so to be more aware of potential influences of the individual preferences in the analysis, I had first accounted for the institutional descriptions on the websites of analysed ELEs as well as any available materials about their founders in the spheres of aims, principles, and values (see Appendix 3). This was a relevant step for controlling the path dependency and confirmation bias as it makes explicit some of my implicit assumptions about the vision of each program. Secondly, during all phases of coding I was reflecting on the memos composed after the interview alongside the transcript.

### **3.5.2. CODING FRAMEWORK AND THE CHANGE OF ANALYTICAL STRATEGY**

The final coding framework attached as Appendix 8 shows a considerable variance in the numbers and distribution of codes between the cases. This situation can be partially credited to the differences in length and density of the interviews, but also due to disparate organisational and philosophical contexts of each vision studied. At this stage, the further use of the structured comparison approach of thematic analysis was called into question. Thematic analysis would require the coded material to be subjected for a cross case analysis according to categories or, even better, emergent themes unifying the content between the cases.

A further thematic analysis of the data was no longer feasible for a range of reasons. The amount of relevant data was considerable in relation to each case. Since vision cuts across discrete categories, most passages could only be fully understood in the light of passages coded in other categories. Coding passages in more than one category reflected that and was a deviation from the practice of thematic analysis. Furthermore, precise descriptions and

<sup>56</sup> A fully deductive coding framework would have required a disjunctive and exhaustive set of categories that could not be created in an exploratory study like this if there were no previous theories of ELE to be applied.

prototypical examples of each category were not feasible to create and not practical for an analysis in a small-n study. Topic summaries for each category was not seen as a helpful strategy given the disparities of the ecologies of each vision; abstracting the vision from the context would tell us something, but not what was the most relevant for the research question.

Given the above limitations, the holistic analysis of each case as a vision was prioritised: each vision had to be understood hermeneutically before any cross-case analysis was to be attempted. This way, the eventual frame of comparison would be a meaningful, not mechanical ('rule-based'), common frame of comparison. The eventual analysis can be classified as interpretive sense-making (Welch et al., 2011, p. 745).

### **3.5.3. ANALYSING THE CODED MATERIAL**

Coding the material, I realised that I had two related but distinct interests: a leader-centred type building for each vision and problem-centred comparison between visions.

The first approach was synthetic in nature: it tried to construct a holistic vision for each leader and then relate it to other holistic visions, seeking some core qualities for them. Passages that repeated some statements more than once and notes from the interviews helped identify such core qualities as perhaps more relevant for the vision than others. In this approach, leaders were treated as natural types, and a typology of visions of those leaders were created.

The second approach was more analytical, since it sought to identify the similarities and differences between the visions bracketing out the context and internal coherency of the visions. The data was treated here more like a text than as an organic record of interaction, and the topics discussed in those texts were systematised and elaborated. Acknowledging the complex nature of text, both explicit and implicit similarities and dissimilarities between the visions were studied. This way the hermeneutical sense-making within cases was complemented by a more structured, deductive comparison of the visions between cases. This 'twin way' allowed for the keeping of data that were relevant to one leader but not comparable between all visions. They offered complementary perspectives on the vision of ELE and both informed the creation of the themes and the eventual answer to the research question based on those themes.

Practically, the data analysis started by selecting 12 categories which were most developed (5 from 'theory', 3 from 'practice' and 4 from 'personality' and 'politics'). Those categories were selected in a balancing act between individual importance for the leader and comparability, using both quantitative criterion of frequency and qualitative criterion of meaning.

Passages from all interviews coded in those twelve categories were retrieved for a closer analysis. Repetitions were eliminated, long sentences/passages were shortened, at times paraphrases were made to capture the meaning in the more analytical sense. The resulting amended materials was used for the drafting of leaders' sections that combined the narrative using paraphrases with direct quotes. Those draft sections were shared with the leaders (as discussed in section 3.4.6).

While the leaders were working on their corrections, I noted any striking similarities between the emerging elements of visions in comments (to be used in the analytical chapter) and footnotes (to be retained in the results chapter). I also summarised each leader's understanding in each category in the form of a table containing the core findings (section 4.9). Following the principal focus of this study, I devoted most attention to the theoretical aspects of each vision.

In the next step, I conducted the synthetic and analytical comparisons across the leaders and categories according to the double approach method described above. The process of generating those comparisons relied on a free interpretation of the organised material according to the overall principle of type-building which is 'searching for multi-dimensional patterns and modes that allow researchers to understand a complex subject' (Kuckartz, 2014, p. 103).<sup>57</sup> Synthetic comparisons resulted in the typology and in-case summaries of each leaders' vision (see section 5.1) while analytical comparisons produced the between-case comparisons of open and hidden agreements and disagreements (see section 5.2).

Descriptive, synthetic, and analytical summaries concluded the data analysis and formed the basis for an interpretive understanding of ELE that informed the answer to the research question. How the answer was generated and interpreted will be elaborated in section 5.3.

#### **3.5.4. EVALUATING THE STUDY**

This qualitative study should be evaluated (Denscombe, 2014) with an eye to transparency of the researcher, credibility of the connection between the quality of the data and the theoretical framework, dependability of the procedures used, transferability of the results of the analysis to the conclusions drawn, and confirmability (through acknowledging negative results and limitations). Those criteria are naturally different from the positivistic approach popular in quantitative studies. But given the in-depth, unique

<sup>57</sup> Other elements of qualitative text analysis that I was inspired by include the notions of attribute space, synopses, and montage.

character of this study, perhaps the most important question relates to the issues of positionality which inform both intellectual and ethical dimension of this study.

When I embarked on this study, I saw myself as 'a critical friend' of the leaders and their developments in ELE. I had known two of the participants before: Jerzy Axer since 2008 when I started my studies in MISH, and whom I have interviewed on the topic before; and Thomas Nørgaard whom I had spoken with about ELE in 2013. This certainly affected how well I was prepared to write the relevant sections; and it had the potential to influence the analysis.

Furthermore, since 2015 Thomas Nørgaard and Nigel Tubbs were supervisors of this research project, which made interviewing them in the role of first leaders potentially problematic. They both read a very early draft of the literature review and a methodological chapter in 2016: one of them before, the other shortly after being interviewed. They had access to the topic guide and discussed the overall intention of the study with me. All those considerations made me alert to the risk of bias in favour of their interpretations of ELE, and a range of actions were conceived to mitigate this risk.

First of all, Nørgaard and Tubbs were not made aware of the coding framework before they approved the transcript, and the plan for data analysis and tentative conclusions before they returned their sections. The way of presentation of the results in Chapter Four (see section 3.6) also limited the impact of any one leader's opinion on the overall narrative. During the write up phase, the contacts with the supervisors were less extensive than earlier. They were also subjected to all the same communications and procedures as other leaders. Since the study did not have evaluative or practical character, they had less of a stake in any particular result. Finally, it should be noted that even though they work currently at one university, Nørgaard and Tubbs run two distinct ELEs and have distinct visions of ELE: they cannot really be said to 'sing from the same hymn sheet'.

The bias cannot fully evaporate, but the same limitations can be viewed as an opportunity for a deeper understanding. Practically, one could question if conducting a similar study under the supervision of people who did not have the personal experience in designing ELE would provide better results. The opportunity for a closer cooperation with two well-informed, experienced ELE leaders allowed for the adoption of a multi-dimensional perspective to think about the topic from its very inception. Given the assumed perspective co-creation of knowledge, this was a plus. Furthermore, I actively sought opportunities to discuss my study with a broad range of informed participants, and in this process became biased in as many directions as possible. Some of those readers and listeners might have had their own agendas; to me, this broad consultative process was a part of the data analysis to obtain as holistic an understanding of the cases as possible.

Overall, this study tried to live the tension between the disinterested research and interested dialogue. This last concept informed the strategy of presentation of data.

### **3.6. PRESENTATION OF DATA**

#### **3.6.1. RESEARCH AS AN IMAGINED CONVERSATION**

The eight leaders of ELE discussed in this study never met in one room.<sup>58</sup> The results of the empirical part of the study will follow the experimental, counterfactual comparison design (Gerring and McDermott, 2007, pp. 696–7) that I would prefer to call an imagined conversation. The goal is to offer a reader a version of a structured dialogue about the aims, contents, practices, and the relevance of ELE between the eight leaders and their visions. Reviewing their position across different categories will expose similarities and differences not just in the contexts of different countries and institutions, but also with regards to the guiding philosophy of liberal education embodied in the vision.

An imagined conversation is a substitute for the real conversation between those founding leaders that did not happen, and most likely never will. Reasons for this might be practical, fundamental, or circumstantial, but the debate about ELE is certainly weaker without it. The format of an imagined conversation allows for acknowledging the differences and convergences in how ELE is understood from a certain distance and through the moderation of an aspiring academic.

This act of moderation prevents seeing Chapter Four as a kind of a *Syntopicon* of the visions of ELE. Such an objectifying and authoritative classificatory approach would not reflect the co-creating, to a certain extent contingent nature of this research as reflective of the values of the researcher. Another researcher attempting to generate the same conversation with the same people would have generated a different material and might have arrived at different conclusions.

The interviews were neither natural conversations nor structured surveys. Through careful listening by a critical friend, the leaders were encouraged to participate in a study that would help their ideas reach a broader audience. They have influenced the goals of this study, but at least some of them remarked that they have benefitted from the participation in many ways:

<sup>58</sup> AL steering committee meetings and 2000 conference included five of the eight (Axer and Abrahám were AL members from 1996; Kuposov and Mikhailov from 1998). STINT-organised conference on liberal education in Stockholm in 2004 was close to that result (Nørgaard and Borgert participated, Kuposov and Axer were allegedly invited but declined, and Adriaansens had to cancel last minute). In September 2015, the ACTC/ELA conference in Amsterdam was attended by three first leaders: Tubbs, Nørgaard, Abrahám.

they reflected on what they did and what they really wanted, and by getting confronted with a different perspective on their vision, in some places they reinforced their convictions, in others they might have changed their mind.

The ultimate task of this research was however to turn the eight conversations into one that is common. The disconnect between the various ways of thinking about ELE has been shown in Chapter Two, and this research attempted to address this important limitation. The best strategy to do so seemed to be creating a careful frame of comparison for a newly generated data. Also beneficial was the division between the results and the analysis, so that the reader could benefit from the former even if they were not convinced of or interested in the latter.

### **3.6.2. DATA PRESENTATION STRATEGY**

The decision to present the results according to cases and not the themes reflects the study design and dynamics. While thematic coding normally structures the results according to the themes emerging from the data analysis, in this study each leaders' vision was presented separately according to the structuring categories. A collective case study called for the holistic description of the cases, and since the case was a vision created from the new empirical data, it could not be contained in a brief section of methodology. The exploratory character of this study further supported a decision to present the results in a way that allows for both vertical and horizontal reading, that is according to cases and according to the categories from data analysis. This strategy of data presentation allowed for organisation of the visions and comparison between them to ascertain what ELE in the current moment refers to.

Chapter Four contains pre-structured narrative presenting the interview material in reported speech with very limited commentary from the researcher. Those narratives are preceded by the contextual information about the leader and their programme that was important for understanding the facts to which the leaders referred to in offering their vision.<sup>59</sup> Within each section, I attempted to convey the complicated chronology by narrating with the use of different tenses to reflect the situation of the interview (past), events from before the interview was taken (past perfect), and general opinions that continue to be true today (present).

<sup>59</sup> Jerzy Axer's section had fewer quotes than the others because of the interview being conducted in Polish; many direct quotes would be less compelling.

Sections on each leader were ordered according to the year of engagement (discussed in section 3.3.2) and contain subsections related to theory, practice, and context of a vision of the leader. Theoretical sections deal with the purpose of liberal education, its essence and aims, as well as the end goals associated with a particular form of ELE. In those, some leaders chose to speak more about concepts other than liberal education or use a different phrasing or name for the core idea; this was not questioned, but any differences were noted. Theoretical sections concluded with the vision of an (ideal) prospective student and an (ideal) alumnus/ae of a particular ELE. In those sections, leaders discussed students as the subjects of educational practices of their teachers and themselves. This might be the evidence of a conviction that in this study, students were seen as more constitutive to the vision of ELE than for example the teachers.

The second main subsection deals with the curriculum, pedagogy, and the community aspect. They are linked together as practical aspects of the vision.

The last subsection covers the relevant background for the vision of ELE: personal motivation, American connections, and the awareness and opinion on other ELE programmes. Those four categories are contextual and as such their placement in this study deserves an elaboration.

Often without an active encouragement from the interviewer, the first leaders spoke at length about the topic not directly connected to the vision of ELE, coded as ‘personality’ or ‘politics’, that is referring to a personal engagement or the organizational landscape of particular ELE. For the leaders, those topics were clearly relevant background for understanding their vision, as 40-50% of all codes.<sup>60</sup> The two coding categories were often tangled together and with other categories, which was not surprising for the interviews of the leaders. Where possible, I tried to independently corroborate the information referred to in those sections.

<sup>60</sup> Percentages of authorised transcript passages coded in the main category ‘personality’ and ‘politics’ also varied between the leaders, see:

|                   | Mikhailov | Adriaansens | Axer | Borgert | Koposov | Tubbs | Abrahám | Nørgaard |
|-------------------|-----------|-------------|------|---------|---------|-------|---------|----------|
| personality       | 17%       | 14%         | 16%  | 22%     | 15%     | 10%   | 19%     | 16%      |
| politics          | 33%       | 30%         | 35%  | 28%     | 35%     | 29%   | 34%     | 22%      |
| Total for the two | 50%       | 44%         | 51%  | 50%     | 50%     | 39%   | 52%     | 38%      |

While the data coded in those categories provided a wealth of information about the programme and deepened the understanding of the visions, they were not easily comparable between the cases, and therefore were included in the descriptive analysis. What was however comparable and relevant were the leaders' opinions related to three of the issues identified as features in section 2.2.3.: why did the first leaders get involved in their ELE projects in the first place; what role did the US-related actors play in their ELE programme; and what was their knowledge and opinion on other ELE developments. I included those topics in the analysis as contextual categories; the data here can be used to compare how the leaders' opinions on those matters stack up against generalisations in previous research. They also informed the analytical comparisons and the eventual answer of this study.

This concludes the first part the dissertation, which dealt with the problem of this study. Chapter Four will present the results of interviews as evidence for and against a unified vision of ELE, whereas Chapters Five and Six will try to answer the question and explore the possible consequences of this answer. In a way, the remaining part of the dissertation will be an attempt to offer a solution to the problem discussed heretofore.



## CHAPTER FOUR. CASE STUDIES: CONVERSATIONS ON EUROPEAN LIBERAL EDUCATION

### 4.1. HANS ADRIAANSENS. UNIVERSITY COLLEGE UTRECHT, THE NETHERLANDS

#### Bio

Hans Adriaansens (\*1946) was awarded a PhD in sociology by Tilburg University in 1976; he was appointed full professor there a few years later. His doctoral research on Talcott Parsons brought him to Harvard, in 1977 he spent a year as a visiting lecturer at Northern Illinois University, and in 1980 he was awarded a further scholarship by the American Council of Learned Societies at Smith College. Adriaansens began studying voluntary organisations but after meeting Peter Rose he became fascinated by the private, well-endowed, women-only liberal arts college itself.

In 1987, Adriaansens received a double appointment to the National Research Council for Government Policy,<sup>61</sup> a high-profile ‘independent think tank of the Dutch government’, as well as a professor at Utrecht University. As a dean of the Faculty of Social Sciences at Utrecht (1990-96), Adriaansens started a course in ‘general social sciences’, where students could take courses beyond their narrow study program. In his work for WRR, Adriaansens was responsible for the preparation of 1995 report ‘Higher Education in Stages’,<sup>62</sup> which made the case for the introduction of a bachelor’s level degree and a differentiation of aims at different levels of higher education.

After his tenure as a dean, Adriaansens started University College in Utrecht. In 2004, he moved to establish Roosevelt Academy in Middelburg. A founding member of ECOLAS (2007-2019), Adriaansens retired in 2012, but remained an active part of the ELE scene.<sup>63</sup>

#### Institutional profiles

University College Utrecht (UCU) opened in 1998 as a residential college offering a three-year, English-taught bachelor’s degree in the liberal arts and sciences as part of Utrecht University. UCU follows an open curriculum model with distribution requirements in the social sciences, sciences, and humanities. For many years it also had separate, skills-oriented courses in the ‘academic core’. About 200 students, one third of which international, begin their studies at

<sup>61</sup> Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid (WRR), with a portfolio for higher education and the welfare state.

<sup>62</sup> (*Higher Education in Stages. Summary of the Report 47th Report to the Government, 1995*).

<sup>63</sup> Adriaansens is an author of the following LE-relevant publications: (Adriaansens, 2014, 2017a, 2017b).

UCU every year. Since UCU started, eight institutions have been created in the Netherlands following the 'university college model'.

In 2004, University College Roosevelt (UCR, until 2013 Roosevelt Academy) opened in Middelburg as an autonomous unit accredited by Utrecht University. The name reflects the Roosevelt family who emigrated to the US from Zeeland. While largely following the UCU academic model, the UCR campus is scattered across the historical town, including the medieval city hall granted to UCR by the city authorities.

#### **4.1.1. THEORY**

##### *Conceptual understanding*

Adriaansens' approach to the liberal arts was minimalist:

a format, and a basic 'philosophy' -- that is all I need from liberal arts.

Liberal arts approach means for him a convergent curriculum that offers individualised study paths delivering the gradual, conscious focus on one area of interest. Pre-tracked higher education system requires that students make a 'silly choice at a very young age'; in liberal arts, they need to make choices throughout their undergraduate education, navigating the general education requirements with the major they choose later and some electives.

Adriaansens believes that 'lofty promises' of cognitive integration have the best chance of realisation when liberal arts education is delivered in a college setting. When students know each other and interact over their diverse interests and pathways, they prepare themselves to navigate life in a pluralist community. This is especially visible in international colleges. College setting also makes students learn better, since college creates a culture of excellence (sometimes referred to as a 'pressure cooker' or a *hogedrukpan*). This is the power of the 'context'.<sup>64</sup>

The university college model that Adriaansens introduced can be called 'the Dutch mix' of a liberal arts curriculum and a college setting.

For me the liberal arts and the college theme are equally important.

He saw both components as European in origin but it is the US that he saw 'the power of a liberal arts approach'. American liberal arts colleges maintained the dedication to the ideal

<sup>64</sup> In the interview, Adriaansens used 'context' to refer to a range of aspects of education: the class size, active pedagogies, the moral dimension of education, and finally residential college setting that increases student engagement and results.

that Europe abandoned and showed how the proper context can deliver superior educational results.

We have exported all that to the United States, and now we are trying to import again what we lost.

One difference was that Adriaansens preferred the 'Oxbridge size' of 600-800 students rather than 2000-3000, typical of an American liberal arts college.

The liberal arts for Adriaansens is clearly academic, not vocational, and belongs only to the undergraduate level. At the bachelor's level students should focus on developing their interests and personality, receiving an education that offers 'some degree of balance between the cognitive and the moral dimension'. They should also learn the academic skills that will be useful in a range of possible futures. This broad academic base of the higher educational pyramid prepares students for further vocationally/market- and professionally/research-oriented studies at the master's and doctoral level, respectively.

A college without liberal arts (as in Utrecht Law College, for example) is still 'interesting' for Adriaansens, since students get to know each other and engage in serious contacts, but it lacks the 'multidimensionality' of the liberal arts approach. LAS without the college component makes it difficult to fulfil the promises of the liberal arts philosophy (Adriaansens noted the complaints about liberal arts curricula as offered through large lectures at big research universities in the US). The Dutch mix became an institutionalised model that UCU, UCR and most university colleges in the Netherlands follow.

### Preferred label

By using the term 'university college', Adriaansens wanted to make the connection to the first college at Oxford. Since the term 'college' could be misunderstood in the Dutch context as a further education institution, 'Roosevelt Academy' was first used to signal the academic orientation of what became UCR later. The benefit of the name 'college' was marking that the student is going to learn more than just 'sociology' or 'physics', and it might not yet be clear what they would focus on.

Most often, Adriaansens referred to his developments as 'the Dutch mix' or the university college, rather than with the version of 'liberal arts'; the preference for the name college was also seen in the name ECOLAS.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Adriaansens prefers the phrasing European Colleges of Liberal Arts, not European *Consortium* of the Liberal Arts.

### External purpose

For Adriaansens, the liberal arts imply a connection between the cognitive as well as the moral/ethical dimension of education. Such combination was 'completely alien' for the Dutch as education (*onderwijs*) refers only to the former and the latter is the prerogative of a family. In the US colleges the connection was maintained, and education meant more than 'piling up knowledge'. The moral dimension meant 'raising youngsters into citizenship', as well as assuming 'responsibility for themselves, each other and the environment, institution, or the world'. This understanding of the morality Adriaansens called 'very simple' and not related to any 'specific form of morality'.

I don't say this from any religious or political background, I only want our graduates to develop a cause to fight for and a sense of responsibility toward each other, the community, and to truth.

A college setting makes this moral dimension impossible to avoid. Living together, students expose their interest, habits and beliefs to others, and they have to learn how to live with difference. They build much stronger relations with the faculty and take more responsibility for their own education. Combined with cultural diversity, college offers a training ground for democracy as differences can be translated into debates and joint initiatives.

Still, Adriaansens underlined that the college model provides superior learning outcomes:

By introducing liberal arts within a college setting we tried to introduce a better balance of cognitive and moral elements of academia and show people that their cognitive performance and their labour market position were way better than without the collegiate setting.

Alumni of the colleges were less prone to the 'trained incapacity' (referencing the work of Thorstein Veblen, continued by Kenneth Burke)<sup>66</sup>, and achieved better results. After UCU started, its graduation rates were visibly higher than in the rest of the university (93% vs. 22%). Board members at Utrecht were interested to see this kind of efficiency. Supporting the college setting, they were also letting the moral dimension back into Dutch higher education. Adriaansens called it a 'nice Trojan horse situation'.

<sup>66</sup> A concept first proposed by Thorstein Veblen during the First World War, and elaborated by Kenneth Burke two decades later, means blind spots developed in the course of routine activities.

### Target group

UCU was selective, but only regarding the motivation to study more than one discipline. Everyone with the highest level of Dutch secondary school diploma (VWO), or international equivalent, was for Adriaansens cognitively ready to enter a university college. The university college allowed students to combine their divergent interests within one study course, but he also pointed out that:

It is, in fact, a system in which many students may also choose not to choose.

After decades of open admissions to Dutch higher education, university colleges in a way reintroduced selectivity. Critics called them 'elitist' and cosmopolitan bubbles 'for the spoiled children'. Adriaansens saw it as unfair, because UCU was primarily selecting for motivation and personality traits:

People with discipline, who know what they want to achieve, are wonderful candidates for a university college.

During the early years of UCU and UCR, Adriaansens personally interviewed many candidates, seeking to learn from them the answer to the following question:

How do you think others benefit from your presence in the college?

Especially in the UCR case, self-selection was also relevant:

Most Dutch students would first think of going to Utrecht or Amsterdam before even considering Middelburg, so if they finally decided for Middelburg one can be pretty sure that they have made a well-considered choice.

Adriaansens was not focussing on the 'best' candidates only, because he saw the university college as supportive of the growth of every student, regardless of the starting point. University college is the context that allows students to flourish; it creates the excellence:

Excellence is a result, not a starting point. We make the social structure, the context, in which people cannot but excel. That is the idea. And excellence is the final result of having made the most out of one's possibilities.

Adriaansens saw this decisive power of context in his own education. When he attended a residential, intensive programme for boys considering ministry, he saw otherwise third-rate students who were able to either achieve first-rate results or at the very least complete their education with little delay. The same principles would work in universities if they were to adopt the efficient collegiate organisation.

Adriaansens discussed the example of Fontys Polytechnic that successfully introduced the collegiate structure. He believes that, for organisational reasons, going collegiate is the only chance for universities to survive. Only then the full potential of university colleges will be unveiled:

I honestly believe that if we can make a change from a university of different 'studierichtingen' to university consisting of colleges in the bachelor's stage, that it would be an enormous step forward.<sup>67</sup>

He conceded to the critics, however, that despite being very international, university colleges struggled to attract socially and economically diverse national student body. Especially since the institutional fees were introduced on top of the tuition (Adriaansens did not see it as necessary), minority students had proven very difficult to recruit. The underrepresentation reflects both lower levels of education (many lack the VWO diploma) but also the cultural and economic expectations of their families. Adriaansens saw it as one of the important challenges to address.

#### Model alumni

Rather than arriving to a university college with a predetermined goal or career path, Adriaansens would like to see the students acquainted with multiple ways of thinking and living. Based on that they should realise their actual preferences and gradually zoom in 'on what they believed was most interesting to them'.

Faculty and administrators should create the best structural conditions possible to make it happen. University colleges, Adriaansens believes, prove that in the right setting, the same students perform much better, so 'It is up to us to make them excel at the college'. This was his response to the widely held belief that the low completion rates reflect the laziness of students.

After completing their bachelor's degree, students might or might not immediately proceed to master's course. What mattered for Adriaansens was to extend their possible choices by making the bachelor a degree in its own right.

<sup>67</sup> See also: (Adriaansens, 2017a).

#### 4.1.2. PRACTICE

##### Curriculum

Adriaansens believed that student choice is an essential feature of a liberal arts curriculum. Open curriculum at UCU followed the model of Smith College which only had very limited core curriculum. A modest distribution requirement at UCU was designed to ensure that every student completed some coursework in all four areas of the 'liberal arts and sciences' degree: humanities, social sciences, sciences, and the so-called 'academic core'. Since European bachelor's degree is only three years, students choose their major already after the first year. Selected faculty members received UCU fellowships to develop signature courses which did 'not necessarily belong within the strict limits of a narrowly defined department'. The freedom to design such courses attracted some professors, who knew they would get more and better students for those courses at UCU than elsewhere in the university. Similarly, Adriaansens pointed out that the liberal arts curriculum was favourable for faculty members from the under-enrolled majors, especially in the humanities and theoretical part of the sciences.

##### Pedagogy

UCU faculty members hailed from across the university, but creating UCR Adriaansens was able to recruit the initial cadre himself. In doing so, he did not prescribe the pedagogical models at all. Having established the ground rules for assessment and capping the class size at 25 students, Adriaansens left it to the teachers to decide how to best organise the learning in their courses.

The principal reason was that, for Adriaansens, once the parameters of the context are set, the right type of learning must follow.

A fitting context is way more important and decisive for a successful teaching and learning process than whatever form of didactics. Because if the context is okay people are stimulated to proactively engage in learning from each other and that is what the education is about.

In this format, the teaching is necessarily interactive, students have a chance to present and discuss their papers, and discussions emerge naturally. The liberal arts pedagogy arises from the context.

## Community

Adriaansens believes that 'an adequate context for teaching and learning' is best offered in the Oxbridge-size college:

I always explain to parents that by taking part in a small-scale teaching and learning situation students feel responsible not only for their own learning, but also for the education of their fellow students.

'if I don't write the paper I was supposed to, the consequence is that 20 students cannot read my paper, which will make me feel ashamed so that I won't do that next time'.

This is the kind of responsibility for each other, and also for the institution, that I am talking about.

The collegiate setting for Adriaansens can in principle be made compatible with a range of residential arrangements: UCU students live on a physically separated campus, in the monumental former army barracks; in Tilburg they live close to the university but not in dorms; in Maastricht students are free to live wherever they want; in Middelburg, university accommodation is scattered across a small, historical city, which, in a way, becomes the campus. Adriaansens preferred a situation in which students live together because this is how they get 'exposed to different cultures, nationalities, and languages' more easily. Where an institution cannot offer that, it should at least dedicate some common spaces for the interactions to take place.

The delivery of the curriculum relied primarily on the teachers from other departments of the Utrecht University who realised part of their contracts at UCU. Heads of departments also were on partial contracts. UCU faculty members had tutoring responsibilities for the students, too, advising them in the choice of courses for a sensible larger trajectory.

The Dutch mix has the 'intrinsic multi-disciplinarity' of academic disciplines that intersects with the social diversity of students in terms of class and nationalities. The more of both, the better. Together, those two types of diversity offer a superior backdrop for learning:

Completely different perspectives, and different forms of 'taken-for-grantedness'. The more perspectives introduced into the program, social, economic, cultural, the better it is. That is the idea. The fact that students are being confronted with people of different habits, different beliefs, different conceptions of democracy, human rights etc. is something that is in itself a very productive learning factor.

Adriaansens was worried that national policies in higher education can hinder the creation of such diverse communities. In a small country like the Netherlands, public transport subsidies for students disincentivised residential education; and introducing 'institutional fees' for university colleges increased the attendance cost as compared to other programmes. Adriaansens believed that it was a choice, not necessity, as his model for university colleges did not incur larger costs for the institution. And he cared about affordability of public higher education.

No, I am not interested in aggravating the student's financial situation by introducing American ways in this country.

#### **4.1.3. BACKGROUND**

##### Personal motivation

Only during his third stay in the US (1980-81), Adriaansens became enamoured with the ideas of a college and the liberal arts.

I noticed there what was possible. It sounds stupid and as a sociologist I should have known better in the first place. It was there that I noticed how important context is in education, and it was there that I saw the power of a liberal arts approach.

Adriaansens' work at the National Research Council for Government Policy earned him a reputation of being well connected to the government. As a dean and vice-rector of Utrecht University, he was in a good position to lobby for UCU. When the former NATO barracks were emptied in the suburban part of Utrecht, Adriaansens immediately saw the similarity to US college campuses.

What Adriaansens thinks helped him put UCU together was being 'stubborn and crazy-hanky'. Some faculty members expected the project to end quickly and in a great disaster. The superior quantitative outcomes of collegiate education silenced the opposition. Adriaansens was proven right in that university college is a more efficient organisational type, and that it should be spread as a model:

It all began with experiences during my various stays in the United States, (...). What I discovered at Harvard, Amherst and Smith, was that our students are as good as the students I saw there, but their final results are so much lower, and that is more than a pity, it's a waste. It is a waste that for a great deal can be blamed on the current organisation of our universities. Maybe it is my secular version of priesthood.

### American connections

The difference between liberal arts education and the dominant model of European higher education lay in sustaining motivation. American students were not inherently better:

But differently from our incoming students, they managed to keep up their initial drive and didn't lose it after a couple of months like our own students do. (...) I had that experience also with my own children. During their years at Utrecht University they were quite satisfied with a C or C-, but after I had persuaded them to go to Smith and Amherst, they turned out to be top-notch students and wouldn't settle for less than A's. This is when I found out that context matters. It is context; indeed, it is all about context.

Adriaansens saw the positive examples of the role of the context at Harvard, Radcliffe, Smith and Amherst Colleges. Harvard was a common reference point for Adriaansens: see 'General social sciences' degree at Utrecht University in the 1990s,<sup>68</sup> or later calling UCU as 'Harvard under the Dom' in 1998,<sup>69</sup> and later when UCR adopted crimson as its colour. Smith College was, naturally, the direct inspiration. Both at UCU and UCR, Adriaansens quickly set up exchange programmes with the US institutions.

But Adriaansens also saw how the context can affect similar student in the negative manner, as when he visited Berkeley where due to budget limitations a nominally liberal arts curriculum was delivered in the form of lectures for as many as 250 students.

Students get lost, become cynical and feel alienated, notwithstanding the liberal arts set-up.

### European connections

Adriaansens was naturally very invested in the Dutch liberal arts scene. Louis Boon, who established University College Maastricht in 2002, spend some time at UCU to observe its set-up. Alkeline van Lenning had a plan for what is now University College Tilburg already when Adriaansens was establishing UCR, even though for some years it was only a programme.

Being small as it was, there was no explicit intention to turn it officially into a college, but it did look like a college and functioned like a college.

<sup>68</sup> According to Peter Rose (Rose, 2004), the course was loosely inspired by broad, interdisciplinary degree in 'Social relations' offered at Harvard in 1950s and 1960s. According to Howard Gardner, a member of the last cohort of 1971, the ambition was no less than 'synthesising social science' (Gardner, 2018)

<sup>69</sup> According to (Dekker, 2017e).

Adriaansens assisted with the creation of Amsterdam University College, convincing boards of the two founding Amsterdam universities to give the future dean a free hand; he applauded how Marijk van der Wende handled this task. In smaller ways Adriaansens was also involved in the creation of Erasmus University College and consulted the students trying to convince university boards to establish university colleges elsewhere. In Utrecht, Middelburg, and Maastricht, it was the grassroots support that fuelled the creation of university colleges.

The success of university college model had a dark side, too. Adriaansens was worried about the growing number of professional institutions adopting the 'university college' label, despite neither being part of a university nor having a serious academic orientation.

Abroad, Adriaansens mentioned University College Freiburg, the first German public ELE as loosely based on the Dutch mix. Heiner Schranz, former dean, was Adriaansens contact there. Detlef Müller, a 'very traditional' emeritus professor at University of Bochum, put Adriaansens in touch with colleges in Chongqing and Shanxi (china) which he later consulted. Some other connections never got off the ground. Faculty members from the University of Birmingham registered their interest, but eventually grew worried about the high cost of a college component. Professors from Ghent, Bruges, and Kortrijk explored the university college model but lacked enough institutional backing to make it happen.<sup>70</sup>

Adriaansens believed that ECOLAS 'made a first step and within the limits of money, time and voluntarism it has done what was possible'. Discussing his experiences with LESC conference, Adriaansens hailed the importance of showing the 'concrete results in the areas the audiences are interested in' rather than praising the intrinsic value of the model:

Again, I have nothing against philosophising about liberal arts, but at this stage in its development in Europe, instead of making it acceptable it turns it into a new ivory tower.

Through Abrahám, Adriaansens was long aware of Axer, but had never met him:

I never met him, which is a pity, also because I understand from Samuel that he is as stubborn as I am (...) and that he was kind of afraid of the college component in my liberal arts thinking. (...). I never met him, strange but true. Every time there is a risk that the two of us meet, it fails.

<sup>70</sup> More recently, Adriaansens was in more regular contact with two Pisa-based institutions: Scuola Superiore Sant'Anna and Scuola Normale Superiore.



## **4.2. ANATOLY MIKHAILOV. EUROPEAN HUMANITIES UNIVERSITY, BELARUS/LITHUANIA**

### Bios

Anatoli Mikhailov (\*1939) received an MA in Philosophy from Belarusian State University in 1961 and a PhD from University of Jena in philosophy for a dissertation on Heidegger. In 1991 he had been elected to the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, he created European Humanities University and became its first rector. In 2004, Mikhailov received Goethe Medal for his contributions to Germany. In 2014 he was named the President of EHU.<sup>71</sup>

Ryhor Miniiankou (\*1951) collaborated with European Humanities University since 1994 in a range of teaching and administrative roles, currently as the Head of Social Sciences Department. Miniiankou studied philosophy at Moscow State University. He is a former chair of Philosophy and Cultural Studies at National Institute of Higher Education in Minsk (1991-1997),<sup>72</sup> and History of Philosophy and Culture at Belarussian State University (1997-2000).

### Institutional profile

European Humanities University (EHU) was founded in Minsk in 1992 as a private university offering undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the humanities and social sciences. EHU pioneered new disciplines and revived those banned or truncated during the communist period. It also had a strong research profile. Authoritarian Belarussian government forced the closure of EHU in 2004.

In 2005 EHU reopened in Vilnius as a 'university in exile', with the support from the EU, the governments of the Nordic countries, and private foundations. EHU introduced distance learning programmes in which most of the current 800 students are enrolled. 4-year bachelor's degrees are taught primarily in Russian and Belarussian, though some classes are in English. In 2016 EHU expanded its core curriculum, which all students take regardless of the discipline they are registered in, as a way of elaborating its liberal arts base. From 2018 EHU is located in a renovated monastery donated by the Lithuanian government.

<sup>71</sup> Mikhailov is an author of the following LE-relevant publication: (Mikhailov, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> Рэспубліканскі інстытут вышэйшай школы

#### 4.2.1. THEORY

##### Conceptual understanding

Mikhailov saw the field of the humanities at the communist universities in Belarus as ‘a hopeless desert’. The new political conditions did not make them any more prone to the reform efforts:

What they offered in the past, and what state universities continue to offer to this day, has nothing to do with education at all.

Mikhailov wanted to establish a ‘different kind of education in the humanities’, abandoning the established ‘pattern of ideological education dominant in the former Soviet Union’. He saw the new condition as a chance to reconnect to the tradition of Western humanities, particularly from the 19th and the 20th century:

The main idea was (...) to understand the values of a different intellectual tradition we were cut from for many decades, and to base our education in the field of humanities on this tradition.

The name ‘European Humanities University’ was supposed to mark the general intellectual orientation but avoid subscribing to any particular educational philosophy. At different times, EHU was referred to as a liberal arts institution, but Mikhailov’s ambition is to offer ‘a grounding in certain basic ideas’ that were ‘completely alien’ to the pre-1991 Belarussian higher education. The central concept should instead be ‘education’.

In my understanding, we do not need to adhere to ‘a concept’ that can be interpreted in various ways. We need to understand what we mean by education in general and liberal arts education in particular and whether it is really education in our troubled world.

Soviet higher education required meticulous specialisation, and the Belarussian system has inherited this orientation. EHU offered a more generalist degree and loosely associated themselves with the liberal arts tradition. A private set up and an alternative organisational structure were there to help rethink the core purpose of reclaiming education to be much more than the transmission of information.

Mikhailov hoped that the historical and cultural change provided a habitat for the new educational project that over time would be ‘filled with unpredictable content’. There was no blueprint for EHU, ‘no guaranteed proper way how to do it’, as is always the case with ‘new human endeavours’ Those early years saw many students attracted to atmosphere of liberalism at EHU, said Miniiankou.

In hindsight, Mikhailov thought of this initial hope that EHU could become an independent alternative in Belarus as ‘perhaps too optimistic’. The new possibilities opening in the 1990s were quashed very quickly. Since 2005, the EU is the largest donor for EHU, which opens the university to the critique from the Belarussian authorities that they are essentially a foreign, political project.<sup>73</sup> Miniiankou said EHU can do both well:

We should combine the academic, high-quality education with our political, democratic role.

Miniiankou noted the generational disconnection which means that EHU students understood well that ‘they live in a different world than their parents’. This different world simply requires a different form of education than the one offered to their parents for the planned Soviet economy. In the recent years, the dedication to the core curriculum reform made the liberal arts orientation of EHU more explicit, according to Miniiankou:

In the first years, we were full of the *artes liberales*, but now we say that this is our aim and we introduce courses in this direction. (...) We want to provide the real liberal arts.

#### Preferred label

The particular label is less important for Mikhailov than understanding what a true education is. The recent promotional materials in English call EHU ‘an autonomous university in the Western Liberal Arts tradition’<sup>74</sup> or a ‘Liberal Arts University’.<sup>75</sup> The institution is said to offer ‘education and research of high quality, based on liberal arts values’ and has been recognised as a liberal education institution by the researchers.<sup>76</sup> The introduction of the ‘Language and Thinking course’ in 2014 was, according to Miniiankou:

The first more practical step towards the liberal arts (...) to speak of it more broadly, more clearly.

<sup>73</sup> The EU funding document stated: ‘The overall objective of this action is to boost democratic development in Belarus by giving young Belarusians access to independent higher education. This will be done through enabling the EHU to provide high quality Western education and subsistence to Belarusian students deprived of a chance to acquire relevant higher education and through providing support to the EHU in pursuing the long-term sustainability of the university’ (European Commission, 2016).

<sup>74</sup> In the Annual Reports from at least 2010.

<sup>75</sup> This label was also used by Bard College Berlin since 2013.

<sup>76</sup> In 2014, EHU has also been described as an imagined community specifically concerned with the ethos of liberal education. ‘An alternative vision of Belarusian national identity has been put forward by educators and intellectuals associated with the private EHU, which began as a self-consciously European institution inspired by a cosmopolitan ethos of liberal education in the arts and humanities, and which embraced Western scholarly standards and research methodologies’ (Johnson and Tereshkovich, 2014, p. 236).

The original intention of Mikhailov was less concerned about the specific educational framework. The particular name or a label did not matter all that much:

By using the 'European', EHU communicated its overall orientation and a sense of direction. It was more important than any particular concept education – whether we choose to call it Bildung, liberal arts, foundational education etc.

Mikhailov referred to EHU in the language of 'Geisteswissenschaften' – a German concept covering some of the English humanities and social sciences, in which was seen as equal counterpart to the natural science. He also conceived of EHU as offering 'Bildung', which he translated as 'a formation of personality, or even upbringing'.

Confronted about whether Bildung and the liberal arts are not two different approaches to education, Mikhailov responded that concepts can never be perfectly translated between the cultures to convey the same meaning:

We do not need to oppose the tradition of Bildung, which addresses the human being in a holistic way, to liberal arts education.

#### External purpose

Mikhailov wanted to develop 'an intellectual niche' for those aware of the need for change in higher education, as well as what Miniankou called the 'introduction of new languages in the humanities and social sciences'. Neither of those was feasible within the existing universities. Mikhailov had been offered a leadership position at the Belarussian State University in 1992 but declined knowing that 'with such professionals there is no future at all'. EHU needed to be build 'from scratch'.

The new space and the new language that EHU provided offered a chance for creating 'a meaningful communication with, unknown for us, Western intellectual tradition' and eventually 'to educate a citizen for a new society'. There was no agreed external goal because of the processual nature of the reality:

All kinds of goals that exist in a society should be not imposed on it as abstract formulas but directed toward the functioning of a particular society at a particular place and time. They all derive from the challenges of reality and are oriented toward future.

Mikhailov presented the task of EHU as protecting the core values of humanity from the two sides of instrumental reason - post-communist intellectual syndromes and the vulgar

pragmatism (Mikhailov, 2009). Education should be based on the 'critical exercise of judgement', and in this respect until today:

There is nothing in Belarus that EHU can be compared with.

Miniankou stressed that within this fundamentally alternative orientation, students can take different paths that can match nonlinear social developments of his country. EHU raises students who might one day shape the Belarussian reality again:

This is the difference between our situation and the situation in Lithuania or Poland. EHU can survive only by constantly changing – and we are responsible for creating the future of Belarussian higher education, because if not us – then who?

### Target group

Asked what attracted students to EHU in the past, Miniankou mentioned 'independence, choice, and dialogue'. They were ready to embark on the study of new disciplines but were even more driven by the 'European' way of learning – a combination of different pedagogical formats.

EHU continues to perceive itself as a Belarussian university – despite the continued vilification by the regime and academics loyal to it. Recruiting from Belarus means that EHU was affected by the reforms of Lukashenko that resulted in the deterioration of the secondary schools.

Miniankou hoped that their deficiencies in written and oral communication would be addressed through the liberal arts courses introduced in the new core curriculum.

Nevertheless, EHU was experiencing a significant dropout after the first year, a 'test year', Miniankou said:

But from the second year – they are OUR students.

Even if no direct political risk was involved, students nevertheless risked a lot when, instead of the public institution at home, they choose to study in a private institution, in exile, which is charging tuition on top of that. Mikhailov hoped that EHU remained attractive for the students who took their education seriously:

We would like to attract the students who do understand that it is highly difficult to get education in humanities. And that it deals with painful transformation of ourselves, not getting fixed knowledge in the form of information.

### Model alumni

Mikhailov did not believe EHU had any clear alumni profile in mind. The students were to expose themselves to the potential of transformative education and develop critical judgement; where this is going to take them was up to them. Of course, EHU is not an ideal institution in an ideal world, so this goal can only be realised to a certain extent. But the freedom, contacts, and conversations offered by EHU are enough to know that they would become different than alumni of the Belarussian state institutions.

### **4.2.2. PRACTICE**

#### Curriculum

EHU distinguished itself from other private institutions in Belarus by offering a high-quality education and rejecting the newly popular, marketable disciplines around business and new technologies. Instead, EHU offered three innovations: cultural studies and modern media studies; theology, which was not taught at Belarussian universities before; and a completely new way of teaching the humanities, philosophy, and art based on the Western European and American theorists who were banned during the Soviet period. Unlike other private institutions, EHU had also a strong research profile. All of those aspects were, according to Mikhailov, 'unknown at the time in Belarus'.

EHU admits students directly into a particular study programme due to the regulatory framework (Miniankou hoped this might change in the future). The core curriculum however was in place from the start to assure they immerse themselves properly into broad areas of the humanities and the social sciences. Mikhailov described its state as a constant evolution:

Our core curriculum aims at addressing the human being in a holistic manner. As such concept cannot exist in a fixed form that could readily be applied, we are continuously developing it. Within the framework of a core curriculum we try to overcome so far neglected ability of the arts and literature to articulate the nature of a human being.

Recently EHU adopted a more integrated, less disciplinary format for its core curriculum, broadly aiming at improving students' ability to contextualise and interpret great texts. In 2014, a 'Language and Thinking' course was introduced with the help of Bard Network institutions, with the main theme of 'freedom and responsibility'. In small groups, students develop academic skills, especially critical reading of the text and argumentative writing. Miniankou saw no difference between the outcomes of regular and distance learning students

in this course. As a tutor, he believes the main objectives of the course are to develop independent thinking and a free expression of thought.

In the last few years EHU also introduced the 'First Year Seminar' and the 'Second Year Seminar', which replaced survey courses and introduction to the humanities and the social sciences respectively. Students are assigned to a section in the former, but can choose their placement in the latter, which for Miniankou was essential since 'it is not liberal arts without choosing'. Faculty members teaching each course hail from different disciplines.

The core curriculum also includes a foreign language course, 'Comprehension and creativity' seminar, and departmental electives. This way core courses are spread across all four years. Tutors attend methodological seminars and offer individual supervision to the interested students.

### Pedagogy

EHU defies many pedagogical expectations in the region: it offers continuous assessment, expects more independent work, and prefers small group seminars to the big lectures. It is even more challenging given that the faculty teaching courses at EHU did not receive this kind of university education themselves and some might have been sceptical. Mikhailov believed that it is difficult to be certain if one does this kind of approach properly, but this uncertainty is part and parcel of the teachers' work:

We need professors who have the courage to question themselves vis-à-vis challenges of the present reality. (...) [We also need] performativity and constant interaction with the students in an attempt to stimulate their creative energy.

Students are also coming to EHU socialised to the situation in which the teacher provides the answer, and in an essay, they need to summarise authors' thoughts. Miniankou elaborated on the ways how their current approach can accommodate the change and support the students:

I think I introduced this approach already in Minsk. Less classes, more independent work, more essays. In the beginning, it was a bit of the struggle, but now with the 'Language and Thinking' course, we prepare the students how to do this, how to work technically, theoretically, and practically. In each six credits course, students must write two or three papers.

## Community

EHU was established so that, according to Mikhailov, a community of high intellectual and moral quality can 'survive and develop'. He did not elaborate on the role of students during the interview.

When the university moved to Vilnius, it was even more difficult to maintain a sense of such community given that the majority of students are distance learners. Miniankou elaborated on the many difficulties facing EHU students but explained that they need to assume responsibility for their education and meet its high academic standards:

They understand that what we expect is difficult, but they can do that - and they must.

### **4.2.3. BACKGROUND**

#### Personal motivation

Mikhailov studied the philosophy of Martin Heidegger which, as all contemporary Western philosophy, was not taught at the Soviet universities. He went for his doctorate to Jena, and besides the language difficulties, he was struggling with the matter itself in a very tangible way. He later understood this to be the true form of education that he wanted to recreate at EHU:

For me it was an existential shock. Suddenly I was able to understand that this content is something very different compared to what I was personally taught in the Soviet Union by my teachers in historical materialism, dialectical materialism etc.

It slowly, probably, moved me in a different direction towards the proper understanding of what philosophy is. It was really not simply theoretical experience, but it was an existential experience. It was a certain bodily experience, unfortunately.

When he returned to Belarus after his studies, Mikhailov supervised students interested in the European intellectual tradition. Given the lack of translations available, except Polish ones, it was almost impossible to properly engage with them during the Soviet times:

But it was clear for me that if the chances are there after the collapse of the Soviet Union, when ideology disappeared, we should do something similar to what I was going through previously, that there should be something made out of such heritage. And it was somehow connected.

After Belarussian independence, Mikhailov leveraged his reputation as a full professor and a youngest member of the Academy of Sciences in the humanities and the social sciences to turn this long-held dream into reality. 1992 was 'a year of great creation', which preceded 'the decade of freedom'. Mikhailov hoped that the young university will 'survive and flourish through indicating its special profile in the field of humanities' by stressing that the European humanities 'should not be understood in an enclosed form'. Many promising younger faculty members joined him in his quest, including Miniankou, who confessed:

We didn't know clearly what to do, but we understood that we had to change.

Given the organic growth of the institution, scholars saw EHU as a space to develop in their own manner. Many were dividing their time between EHU and other workplaces. Miniankou proposed ideas for the reform of higher education, but eventually settled for EHU because 'EHU was for me the place where I was able to do what I want'. The project is in constant evolution ever since it was created, but to him, its initial idealism never dissipated.

#### American connections

EHU was supported by many foundations, including the Higher Education Support Program of the Open Society Institute, and some other American sources. After 1992, Mikhailov visited various US institutions, including the New School for Social Research and Bryant College,<sup>77</sup> whereas Miniankou held visiting positions in higher education departments at California State University and University of California, Los Angeles in 2000. Neither of them discussed G. David Pollick, the former provost and later rector of EHU, who previously held presidencies at Lebanon Valley College and Birmingham-Southern College.<sup>78</sup> During Pollick's tenure at EHU the cooperation with Bard Network was started, which was briefly discussed by Miniankou:

It was our common project. All teachers in this course [Language and Thinking] visited Bard College and worked there. It was a very difficult work experience, because we were not native speakers. They kept saying 'You must constantly take notice, because we must work write, write, write'. But we managed, and now - we work with Bard.

For Miniankou, the ambition was to establish a dual degree programme with Bard, as Smolny College has. But in doing so EHU was not rejecting its European model and orientation.

<sup>77</sup> Now Bryant University, RI.

<sup>78</sup> Pollick's grandparents came from today's Belarus.

We will try to be European college but use this American model how to include this in our space and our traditions.

Miniankou hoped that EHU and Bard would become equal partners working on a meaningful merger of the two traditions.

#### European connections

Mikhailov was well-connected to various German universities (Bochum, Freiburg, Jena, Berlin), but less so with ELEs in the proper sense. But Miniankou was in contact with Jacobs University Bremen and University of Greifswald which for him were examples of liberal arts education, and 'in many ways the American-style university colleges'.

Mikhailov attended a few 'meetings on liberal arts education' that were convened under the name of 'Artes Liberales' in Budapest and Warsaw. He explicitly mentioned Abrahám, since he attended many events organised by BISLA after 2006, but of course he was also in contact with Koposov and Monakhov at Smolny (Miniankou was confident they knew each other very well). Smolny took over about 60-70 EHU students after the 2004 closure; it remains an important partner for EHU, organising joint workshops for the teachers within the Bard Network, which also includes BCB and in some ways CEU.

### 4.3. JERZY AXER. MISH COLLEGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WARSAW, POLAND.

#### Bio

Jerzy Axer (\*1946) graduated from the University of Warsaw (UW) with a doctorate in classical philology in 1972 and a habilitation four years later. In 1981, during the brief 'Carnival of Solidarity' period, Axer was elected dean of the Faculty of Polish Studies. His research interests include classical reception studies, dramatic art, as well as human-animal relations.

After the democratic transformation of 1989, Axer created and led a number of interdisciplinary research and teaching units, mostly within the University of Warsaw. He also organised the final conference of 'Artes Liberales' Association in Warsaw in 2000. Currently he is a Director of Kolegium Artes Liberales.<sup>79</sup>

Axer's institutions might be confusing as they include MISH, KAL, and OBTA-IBI-WAL within UW, as well as AAL, MSH and FIAL outside the UW structure.<sup>80</sup>

#### Institutional profiles

MISH (1993- ) offers an individualised curriculum through a cross-registration right across the humanities and the social sciences faculties. About 100 students selected each year work with faculty advisors ('tutors'). Awarded Hannah Arendt Prize (1999), MISH spread to 8 Polish universities. Since mid-2000s offers both bachelor's and masters' studies, with degrees awarded by the respective faculties.

KAL (2008- ) offers an 'artes liberales' degree at both bachelor's and master's level. The degree includes a small common core, a distribution requirement and a specialisation in humanities, the social sciences and recently anthrozoology. Most courses are offered in Polish. KAL was created as a partnership between UW, FIAL and The Endeavor Foundation.

<sup>79</sup> Axer is an author of the following LE-relevant publications:(Axer, 1997, 1998, 2013, 2015, 2016a, 2016b; Axer and Wąsowicz, 2015a; Detweiler and Axer, 2012).

<sup>80</sup> These developments, referred to by their Polish acronyms, are respectively:

MISH - Kolegium Międzywydziałowych Indywidualnych Studiów Humanistycznych (College of Inter-Faculty Individual Studies in the Humanities);

KAL - Kolegium Artes Liberales, aka CLASs, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, or Collegium Artes Liberales.

OBTA - Ośrodek Badań nad Tradycją Antyczną w Polsce i Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej (Center for Studies on the Classical Tradition in Poland and East-Central Europe) → IBI – Instytut Badań Interdyscyplinarnych (Institute for Interdisciplinary Research) → WAL – Wydział Artes Liberales (Faculty 'Artes Liberales').

AAL - Akademia Artes Liberales (Artes Liberales Academy).

MSH - Międzynarodowa Szkoła Humanistyczna (East-Central European Humanities School).

FIAL - Fundacja Instytut Artes Liberales (Artes Liberales Institute Foundation).

MSH (1996- ) attracts advanced students and doctoral candidates from Eastern European universities for credit-bearing workshops, conferences, and dedicated sessions in order to renew the academic dialogue and explore new methodologies in the humanities across the post-Soviet space. It engaged over 4000 students to date.

OBT/IBI/WAL. OBT (1991- ) was a research centre focussed on the classical cultural heritage and reception in Central and Eastern Europe. Merging OBT with courses in cultural studies, modern Greek philology and interdisciplinary doctoral programmes resulted in the creation of IBI, which in turn was upgraded to a faculty status in 2012 as WAL.

FIAL – Axer's foundation supporting liberal education in the region, established in 1997.

#### **4.3.1. THEORY**

##### Conceptual understanding

Initially, Axer understood what he was doing to be a form of liberal education. He was experimenting with the perceived shortcomings of the higher education system, and only later came to believe that his intuitional solutions might be referred to with this concept. Axer admits himself to be easily bored by the educational theory, what he truly cares about is the 'freedom to wander across many disciplines'.

Axer never intended to become an academic innovator and institution builder, but used his position to create an autonomous, relatively uncorrupted domain in the post-communist academia where one can 'think differently'. His 'milieu' did not distinguish between teaching and research 'in their value systems'. Others branded Axer's chain of institutions the 'Artes Liberales Galaxy', or 'Axerland' (Dahrendorf, 2000), all challenging the closed disciplinary identities and feudal relations in Polish academia. What united them was the biographical experience of the founder and his colleagues but also, Axer believes, some kind of 'a vision that wasn't always clearly articulated'. Central for this vision was the 'lack of tolerance for the status quo', and a certain *élan* of collective reflection and resistance that Axer propped organisationally and rhetorically.<sup>81</sup> In 2015, another professor summarised Axer's vision as follows:

Axer's formula: diversity + teamwork = interdisciplinarity.

Axer understood diversity in terms of academic disciplines, interests, and generations. OBT was for him a way to abandon the self-obsessed, crisis-ridden academic classical philology

<sup>81</sup> This oppositional spirit was compared to the agonistic ethos of the ancient Greeks in a 'virtual dialogue' with Jerzy Axer published in a Polish academic magazine (Axer and Borowski, 2016; Burckhardt, 1999).

towards the new, interdisciplinary field of reception studies. MISH used the 'master-apprentice' model of maximally individualised intellectual growth for the student. KAL crosses the next boundary with its heterogeneous curriculum including the natural sciences, artistic practice, and off-campus activities. Throughout those evolutions Axer's experiments remained open for different political stances and pedagogical strategies.

Teamwork was changing as well. OBTA created a framework for small 'laboratories' where professors could pool their expertise. MISH matched the 'best' students and the 'best' professors serving as faculty advisors (called 'tutors' in Polish) and envisioned tutorials as a tool for avoiding both traditional academic reproduction and increasingly anonymous university experience. In MPD doctoral programme,<sup>82</sup> Axer piloted a range of collaborative innovations that were later implemented in KAL: co-taught modules, project work for teams of students and faculty, co-tutelle by faculty from a different discipline, and developing a close-knit 'community of students and professors.' Axer's focus on teamwork was grounded in the belief that all interdisciplinary encounters produce some interesting outcome.

Interdisciplinarity was changing accordingly. At first, MISH and OBTA were pushing towards a broad reform in which MISH would become a format for the whole university. When that did not happen, and MISH could not offer its own diploma, Axer introduced 'MISH modules' with interdisciplinary classes also open to the students of MISH counterpart in the natural sciences. Axer realised, however, that over time MISH students lost interest in interdisciplinarity and increasingly treated MISH modules as an extra burden. Many MISH students framed the function of their tutors as little more than a required signature on the course plan, and finally, as departments were increasing their requirements for MISH students, fewer of them flaneured across the university. Axer saw this as unavoidable consequence of any university reform:

This dream can never be fully achieved. It will always be an unfinished business. All I can do is to make it as finished as I possibly can.

As the 'local' interests of students (to study particular disciplines) and tutors (to court their future graduate students) grew more prominent than any 'global' vision Axer might have, the student-tutor relation increasingly blended with a thesis supervision model. Eventually, Axer saw no other option but the formalisation of the requirements for the two parties as 'a fine solution of the impossible situation where true diversity and teamwork are no longer possible'.

<sup>82</sup> Externally-funded Międzynarodowe Projekty Doktoranckie, or International Doctoral Projects 'The Traditions of Mediterranean Humanism and the Challenges of Our Times: the Frontiers of Humanity', run between 2010 and 2015.

Around that time Axer created KAL as a smaller-scale laboratory for increasingly heterogeneous experiments that could loosely be called liberal education.

It was only during the between 1996 and 2001 that Axer realised his experiments could be called 'liberal education'. The New York-based 'Artes Liberales' Association, aiming to establish liberal arts programs in the region, invited Axer to its events, who had had little previous experience with international education realm. During those meetings Axer first used the idea of liberal arts, even if 'in quotation marks'. KAL awards today the '*artes liberales* diploma', which is generic, flexible, and does not refer to the American practice. For Axer 'KAL did not go beyond the idea of a general education'. Axer's experiments were built upon diversity, teamwork, and hope that participants won't split into different 'sects'. The next step, or a further synthesis, for Axer was to create a centre for transdisciplinary studies (as research and teaching) that would merge broadly conceived humanities with, for example, physics and biology.

#### Preferred label

Axer was fond of rhetorical tools: he famously referred to MISH as 'breaking through departmental walls' or releasing students from the monodisciplinary organisational 'cages'. His preferred phrasing for the educational idea was either 'interdisciplinary education' or 'inter-area education'; Axer only used 'liberal education' when speaking or writing in English to the foreign audiences. Translating liberal education into Polish would 'ring false', since Axer 'did not bought into American practice' nor explicitly aimed to further liberal education as is done elsewhere.

Several of Axer's institutions are called 'Artes Liberales'. A classical philologist with an interested in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (where Latin was a language of political writings), Axer liked how '*artes liberales*' hinted at the ideal of unity of all knowledge. In the conference room of WAL, a motto adopted from Cicero reads '*omnes artes liberales habent quoddam commune vinculum*'.<sup>83</sup> Axer called his experiments as 'a late offspring' of the Jesuit model of intergenerational, anti-structural education. A common name for WAL, KAL, etc. suggested a common intention; but Axer confessed it was at the same time a way to obstruct any bureaucratic oversight.

<sup>83</sup> Full Latin original '*Etenim omnes artes, quae ad humanitatem pertinent, habent quoddam commune vinculum, et quasi cognatione quadam inter se continentur.*' (Cic. Arch. 1.2), translates as 'In truth, all the arts which concern the civilising and humanising of men, have some link which binds them together, and are, as it were, connected by some relationship to one another' (Tullius Cicero, 1856) via <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0474.phi016.perseus-eng1:1.2>.

## External purpose

Axer wanted to challenge the dominant version of university education through his experiments in liberal learning. In his vision, the disciplinary departments/faculties are villains, interdisciplinary units a collective protagonist, while faculty and students in the latter form a kernel of an active, engaged, and trust-based academic community.<sup>84</sup>

My goal was to create an academic milieu based on *bona fides* (trust) where these members of the academia who think and want in a different manner would meet and will share their ways of thinking across often radically different political, pedagogical, and disciplinary loyalties.

MISH was created a year after a highly successful individual interdisciplinary studies programme in mathematics and natural sciences (MISMaP). The then-rector of the University of Warsaw asked Axer to form a humanities and social sciences counterpart on the way to replacing disintegrated faculties with broad schools and a common undergraduate college. Conceived as a temporary experiment, MISH ended up a permanent structure which (from Axer's perspective) extended OBTA's research mission into a personalised teaching experience. Neither MISH nor OBTA had a predefined external goal, but both had a predefined enemy. For MISH, the adversaries included the post-communist syndrome of disrespecting ambitious individualism, and the sudden massification of higher education brought by increased marketization and access. MISH asked students to unleash their full outside the artificial, disciplinary limitations: a '180-degrees education, not 360 or 15', as Axer half-quoted Goethe's discussions with Eckermann. And at the same time, such education was also practical, in the Ciceronian spirit:

MISH was a milieu of students who receive broadly conceived humanistic qualifications. And they would prove that a broad education is no less useful than a professional one.

Although many private universities opened in Poland during the 1990s, Axer was not impressed by their utilitarian profile and did not want to profit from education in any way. His investment in experimental forms of higher education was fuelled by hope that other universities will follow suit once his model proves successful. Indeed, MISH model spread first across Poland (through AAL) and then in Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia (through MSH). Eventually, the innovative potential of MISH dissipated, and Axer thought that scaling it up further 'did not make sense'. Today, MISH 'still serves some purpose', especially as a pathway of 'the egoism of faculties' or building a future academic or political career for its graduates,

<sup>84</sup> See also (Kontowski, 2016, p. 109).

but it was also weakened by the governmental regulatory overreach. Neither policymakers nor traditional faculties knew much or appreciated MISH model and its values, nor was it immune from attempts of cooptation by 'the market'. Axer realised that the actual innovation and what Hannah Arendt Prize jury once called the "productive use of university autonomy" needed a new vehicle.

KAL inauguration features Axer's speech in which he declared the new institution more resistant to the external pressures. The institution located itself 'on the borders' of existing domains of knowledge, nothing less than a slightly outlandish structure, more openly concerned with the eudaimonic dimension of liberal education.<sup>85</sup> Still, it did not solve all of the dilemmas Axer is now concerned with:

Does Poland need more egalitarian education, or elite education? Where would the energies of enthusiast be better used? Is it worthwhile to create prototypes that would never be accepted as a base for the whole university? Or maybe Poland needs another period of occupation to afford such educational work?

How much would it cost to offer a liberal education, and who should pay for it in Polish realities? And does calling it 'liberal education' corrupt the original idea by bending it to the wishes of sponsors?

For Axer, all educational developments he created went against the dominant trends. At first, before and after 1989, MISH focussed on the individual as a reaction to the pressure of creating superficial communities or collaboration limited to the oppositional/illegal activities. But later, individualism was vindicated, and KAL moved away from it to promote authentic collaboration.

#### Target group

MISH could afford to select from the multitude of most talented candidates. The dynamic structure was both prestigious and attractive, with distinguished professors volunteering as tutors who (according to Axer) were mostly demanding, rhetorically proficient, and full of civic virtues. MISH was well received within the university. The admissions procedure was designed to warrant fairness and fit for purpose, as it allowed candidates to prove their motivation to exceed regular expectations with more than just grades. In the laboratory-sized beginnings, the admission panel of 30 professors and student representatives was reading all recommendation letters, considered the social background of candidates, or even consulted

<sup>85</sup> See (Harward, 2018).

preliminary proposals. Some candidates submitted their works of art for consideration. As MISH grew and regulations became more strict, the only difference between MISH and the regular programs' admission remained an interview.

MISH offered a meritocratic vision of liberal education, which over the years Axer abandoned in favour of a more egalitarian approach of KAL. MISH represented a more conservative orientation, since Axer sought to work with professors and students at least as good as himself. He later saw it as 'not enough' and 'not right', since the most academically gifted might survive anyway (as he did). He even realised that for some talented students, the elite orientation might do some harm. Most of all, Axer could never be sure how much value added MISH brought to already talented students.

KAL offered a superior solution, as it gave the less confident candidates a chance to liberate themselves from the demands of their families, society, university, or the job market. Its broad and unusual degree targets 'systemic misfits'<sup>86</sup>, all those who defy the academic norm. They might be generalists, collaborators, artistic spirits, or choice evangelists. They are screened for current motivation, not past achievement, as Axer considered school grades to be a poor predictor of future performance at a liberal arts institution.

### Model alumni

MISH aimed to produce 'a Renaissance-kind alumnus',<sup>87</sup> with maximally heterogenous interests, ideally alternative and interdisciplinary. But over time it was recast by many students as an efficient tool of getting two university diplomas and by some 'master-professors' as a way of getting talented 'apprentices'. As such trends never became a norm, all three MISH alumni surveys were inconclusive.

Adam Yarmolinsky viewed a teacher as a conscientious carrier of the tradition, the envoy between the past and present, a phrase that Axer remembered from the 'Artes Liberales Association' times. For Axer, liberal education at MISH was a form of 'intelligent patriotism' concerned with decency, a tool to 'retrieve Poland' in the 1990s; students, on the other hand, were mostly determined to retrieve (individual) freedom, almost licentious in its manifestations. Half-jokingly, Axer mentioned that some form of liberal education could be offered to the youth who are avid football fans.

<sup>86</sup> I borrowed this phrase from Scott Buchanan's recollection of the early St. John's College: 'We used to say at St. John's that we were preparing people to be misfits, and we meant that in a very broad sense. Perhaps misfits in the universe for the time being' (Wofford and Buchanan, 1970, p. 203).

<sup>87</sup> A phrase Axer borrows from Teun Dekker (Dekker, 2017e, p. 29).

### 4.3.2. PRACTICE

#### Curriculum

MISH was a platform for cross-registration for courses in different faculty, offering a pathway for more independent study. Axer had hoped that it would create its own curriculum and a diploma over time, but for legal and organisational reasons this never happened. A miniature interdisciplinary curriculum was created as 'MISH modules' where renowned faculty members taught humanities, social sciences, and the sciences courses open for both MISH and MISMaP students. MISH modules were embraced by some, frowned upon by others who saw them as unnecessary distraction.

KAL started with a pilot course in 2008, aiming to replace the 'disciplinary egoism' of the MISH-associated faculties with an interdisciplinary degree that would not recreate 'the variety of academic disciplines on a micro scale'. The full curriculum launched a year later, offering courses which would not fit in any existing faculty, taught by 'diverse teaching personae' and focussed on various academic skills. After some consideration, Axer rejected the later idea of offering more methodology-heavy undergraduate curriculum. But continuous development of KAL allowed for a creation of a master's degree in anthrozoology, within the first Polish centre in human-animal studies.

The core curriculum at KAL is fairly minimal, with a writing and thinking propaedeutic course, a capstone seminar, and a great books course. Two of Axer's distant relatives attended St. Johns, but the latter's approach focussed too strongly on the universalist humanity of the Western culture and did not do justice to Poland's 'regional rootedness'. While Axer would be interested to explore an innovative great books curriculum, it was not clear to him how many language would it have to include, how to overcome the school trauma of reading literature, and whether it should not be a Master's degree.

#### Pedagogy

MISH sought to increase learning by individual academic advising and supervision loosely called a 'tutorial', even though the Oxbridge-style tutorials were fairly unknown in Poland back in the 1990s. In the MISH model, a 'tutor' helped the student identify and follow their interests, and potentially supervised the term papers. Axer's original idea was that 'tutorial pairs would fluctuate every year', all tutors would attend some 'rudimentary workshops' offering not predetermined theory but 'practice-driven reconnaissance missions' to discuss 'the tutoring as we hoped would happen'.

As MISH grew bigger and more regulated, the students and tutors increasingly fell into the 'master-apprentice' model. The cooperation lasted the full five years, the tutor was a thesis advisor. The model brought results, with MISH excelling at producing 'good students as measured by the professional standards', but it no longer had a claim to diversity and teamwork as Axer envisioned it.

KAL attracted the 'genuine teaching devotees' willing to work in an experimental pedagogical space. Axer wanted both conservative ('oppressive') and progressive ('collaborative) teachers to be represented so that the students can decide themselves:

I do not know what is good and what is wrong in teaching. But I know that students know that better than I do.

KAL offered (more expensive) team-taught courses, especially in the core great books course. Axer, KAL administration, and some PhD students often visit the courses to observe and learn, often unveiling some form of a hidden curriculum, as when they realised that students from the 'reading families' are given undue preference in even if no knowledge beyond the reading list is formally assessed. Some of the pedagogical innovations and reflective practices developed for a recent grant project are now deployed in KAL.<sup>88</sup>

### Community

'Logical Semiotics' course was long a single common requirement for all MISH first-year students dispersed across the university. The course played a formative role, offering a shared experience across otherwise individual curricular pathways. Around 2000 Axer was considering creating a residential college, but first he realised he had no legal tools to require students to live therein, and secondly he learned through surveys that MISH students overall desired neither a dormitory nor more organised extracurricular activities.

Tutors from different faculties get to know each other through MISH, while Axer and the rest of MISH administration maintained many 'informal' contacts with their students, especially in the early years. MISH students' union represents the students in the academic council, organises events and trips, and helps with admissions.

Despite those attempts, MISH students struggled with 'uprootedness': they were not really part of departmental communities, but also did not have a space of their own. Both their well-being and their teamwork skills suffered because of that. The thin community of MISH never

<sup>88</sup> 1500 pages of commissioned, mostly unpublished, studies; see also (Axer and Wąsowicz, 2015b, 2015a).

produced strong, trust-based relations which Axer envisioned and it failed to maintain the 'ethos of candour' he desired.

Student representatives were obligatorily introduced at all universities in the 1990s. To Axer, almost all MISH representatives were either self-declared ombudsmen or show-offs, putting curial interests over the common good. As MISH grew bigger and more complex, the genuine involvement, honesty, and openness were increasingly difficult to sustain.

The most successful academic community grew around MPD, partially because of a different type of student-faculty relations. The multi-year generous scholarships permitted doctoral candidates 'to be raised outside the moral corruption of the Polish academia'. This model was not scalable.

At KAL, 'The community exists to the point of awkwardness', said Axer, giving the example of using first names in all communication and developing institutional culture which to him is 'almost a kibbutz'. If that were to continue, students might grow 'too self-important', but Axer saw it as temporary. In a common space on the ground floor, the student life flourished – thanks to so-called 'scientific circles', self-education groups, and artistic communities (mostly theatre). Older students, called 'good spirits', offer peer advising, and can apply for a conference fund in exchange. Some MPD alumni, now serve as faculty advisors to KAL students.

#### **4.3.3. BACKGROUND**

##### Personal motivation

Classical philology, more in the sense of 'Alttertumswissenschaften', rather than as a modern academic discipline, was an obvious study choice for Axer as it was beyond the reach of the communist ideological apparatus: an obscure topic and significant breadth made it very difficult to control. Suddenly in the 1980-81 Axer was catapulted from the library to the dean's chair. Always keen on the 'performativisation of educational contacts', he soon realised that people were reacting to his ideas, personality, and strong beliefs. He first drafted a research structure that would house 'alternative cultures of teaching' in 1981. After the imposition of the Martial Law, Axer remained in position to protect colleagues:

I happened to be a bureaucrat, but I promised myself never to govern a regular structure in the future. I did not stand for re-election and I took on to create alternative structures.

Axer's fondness of interdisciplinary reception studies attracted accusations of 'contaminating the discipline' from the traditionalists in his discipline. Soon after 1989 Axer broke off to

establish an 'independent republican structure where people who believe in something would meet'. Initially OBTA had no positions or a budget, only enthusiasm a new beginning, appropriately so for the nonconformist institution.

Axer felt that uniquely positioned to lead MISH given his reputation among the deans. Asked if he would himself enrolled if MISH existed in the 1970s, Axer replied 'without hesitation'.

Designed as a two-year project, MISH did not become a catalyst of change both the rector and Axer, and the latter stayed in post again:

Since the obstacles were growing (...) I felt increasingly responsible for the survival of a unit.

### American connections

A fellow economist once explained to Axer that liberal arts is simply 'how undergraduate education is organised in America'. The question was sparked by the invitation for the Budapest conference of 'Artes Liberales' in 1996, which Axer suspected of being another 'Marriott Brigade'<sup>89</sup> this time be driven by the 'ideal of spreading the Good News of liberal education in the post-Soviet space'. Axer proceeded with caution, mindful of the risk of new colonialism, but leaving hopeful that the language of liberal education might help him overcome the provincialism of Polish higher education debates. He also valued dispatches from the US liberal arts scene as an early-warning system for his own experiments that until that point were never labelled 'liberal education'.

That changed after 1996 conference, wherein Axer 'blatantly' proposed his experiments as new and interesting for US liberal educators facing an identity crisis:

Borderline laboratories might spark the renaissance of liberal education.

In response, The Endeavor Foundation invited Axer to New York in 1997 to share his perspectives with the liberal educators in the US. Axer explained to Julie J. Kidd, Endeavor's president, that his goals are not yet fully clear and he might be a bad grantee as he is quite addicted to freedom, but she put trust in him saying 'Let those be funds for freedom, then'. Nicholas Farnham<sup>90</sup> and Adam Yarmolinsky<sup>91</sup>, a dynamic duo behind the Educational

<sup>89</sup> Small groups of Western professionals on short-term consulting gigs for the governments seeking to implement market reforms, hardly interacting or interested in the reality outside of their hotel window.

<sup>90</sup> An 'outstanding innovator', in Axer's words.

<sup>91</sup> An Air Force pilot during the Korean War, later an important figure in the Kennedy and Johnson administration, after that an avid educator. In gratitude for Yarmolinsky, who was correcting MISH students essays on his deathbed in 1999, Axer planted an oak tree bearing a plaque for Yarmolinsky's in the KAL garden.

Leadership Programme of the Foundation helped create the connection with Kidd<sup>92</sup> and later invited Axer to ELP Troutbeck seminars. Axer was impressed by university administrators who openly discussed the shortcomings of their institutions and addressed the ethical and psychological issues of liberal arts formula. He saw this as an 'implicit leadership training'. Keen on avoiding any impression of American 'colonialism', Axer never created a full degree programme in English and was not planning to do so in the future.

The connection with the Foundation allowed Axer to meet Donald W. Harward, Elizabeth Minnich, Elizabeth Coleman, Richard Shriver and other liberal educators from the US. The Endeavor Foundation offered multiple grants for Axer's innovations at Warsaw and facilitated the creation of KAL since the University could never afford the full cost of an innovative unit.<sup>93</sup>

### European connections

Farnham invited Axer to 'Artes Liberales' steering committee together with Abrahám, Mikhailov, and Kuposov, among others. The members met about twice a year to exchange of information about the liberal education upstarts in other countries. Eventually, Axer became 'AL' chairman, and in 2000 organised what he still remembers as 'serious' (and final) Warsaw congress of the organisation. He remained in occasional contact with other members of the Committee. A few people from UCU came to attend the opening of KAL in 2009, and through the Foundation Axer met Nørgaard. ECOLAS was less interesting to Axer as he was not concerned with the EU-level policy, and also did not want to make Abrahám appear 'a junior partner'. Axer remains in contact with the MIGO programme in Rostov-on-Don which he helped create; Ukrainian and Belarussian MISH-inspired structures had since closed.

<sup>92</sup> For their previous work on liberal education, see: (Farnham and Yarmolinsky, 1996).

<sup>93</sup> Open Society Foundation, at various stages, offered further support for the projects in Eastern Europe (through its offices in Budapest and Warsaw).

#### 4.4. SAMUEL ABRAHÁM. BRATISLAVA INTERNATIONAL SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS, SLOVAKIA

##### Bio

Samuel Abrahám (\*1960) was born in Slovakia and emigrated to Canada in 1980, where he received his BA and MA in political sciences. In the 1990s, he helped establish the first political sciences department at Comenius University in Bratislava, while working on his PhD at Carleton University. In 1995 he was a Junior Visiting Fellow at IWM in Vienna.

In 1996, Abrahám moved to Bratislava where he established 'Kritika and Kontext' (K&K) journal: a bilingual, English-Slovak journal of the 'archaeology of critical thinking', debating major works of 20<sup>th</sup> century intellectual history. In the same year, Abrahám established the Society for Higher Learning (SHL) as a Slovak chapter of the *Collegium Invisibile* model of academic mentorship for gifted university students across Central and Eastern Europe. He also got involved in the 'Artes Liberales' Association promoting liberal education in the region, of which K&K became the official journal.

After 'Artes Liberales' came to an end in 2001, Abrahám remained in contact with The Endeavor Foundation, which supported his future developments. Abrahám established Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts (BISLA, in 2006) and a consortium of European Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences (ECOLAS, in 2007), and remains at the helm of both until today. Through ECOLAS, Abrahám coordinated two multi-year, EU funded research projects related to ELE.<sup>94</sup>

##### Institutional profiles

SHL followed the model of Invisible Colleges, first established in Budapest in 1992 with the support of the Open Society Foundation, and later replicated in Poland, Lithuania, and Moldova.<sup>95</sup> Each Invisible College selected about two to three dozen of the best students already enrolled at their university (almost always from the humanities and the social sciences), connected them with an accomplished academic to work in 'tutorials', and often arranged for extracurricular courses. SHL (1996-2006) avoided the franchise branding, but largely followed the original in terms of size, activities, and the financial model.

<sup>94</sup> Abrahám is an author of the following LE-relevant publications: (Abrahám, 2012a, 2012b, 2017).

<sup>95</sup> The official Slovak name was Výberový Vzdělávací Spolok; 'Spolok' is a conscious 19<sup>th</sup> century archaism that could be translated as 'Confederation' or 'League'.

BISLA (2006-) is a private undergraduate liberal arts college in Bratislava, offering a three-year, Slovak-accredited bachelor's degree in the liberal arts. Since 2016, BISLA teaches only in English.

ECOLAS (2007-) was created by Abrahám, Hans Adriaansens, Laurent Boetsch and Jochen Fried, as a 'non-governmental educational consulting group and network' promoting the liberal arts in Europe.

#### **4.4.1. THEORY**

##### Conceptual understanding

Abrahám understood a liberal arts approach as 'basically a seminar-type of education' which focuses on an engaging, small scale pedagogy. Students are to play an active role, the teacher is not seen as an absolute authority and both students and teachers 'are equal, sharing passion and experience':

We created liberal arts atmosphere first intuitively at the Society for Higher Learning. Later with BISLA we were already aware of the liberal arts in the United States, how it functioned, thus we basically institutionalised at BISLA what we did intuitively in the SHL.

On his account, Abrahám practised liberal arts before he even learned the name of the concept. During his master's studies in Toronto, he believes he had been implicitly introduced to the idea in the five honours seminars for six to twelve people.

Basically, these were liberal arts courses. Or in the spirit of the liberal arts, because they were very intensive, with huge amounts of reading, lots of presentation, lots of writing.

The initial motivation was personal: Abrahám grew so fond of one of the Professors to eventually take all his courses at a range of departments and sometimes on topics he had never before considered interesting.

At that time, he also realised the limits of critical thinking. Many people tend to overplay this card 'as if critical thinking was the key thing, as if you should be critical for the sake of being critical'. Many students find this opinion popular and subsequently, 'they just question' and they think they have achieved something. Abrahám remembered a scene from Prague in the 1990s during a lecture by Ernest Gellner: a Russian student, 'who probably went through this critical thinking nonsense instruction' ended up 'questioning one of the greatest minds of the

20<sup>th</sup> century'. Gellner was baffled by the questions and noted that they do not make any sense, but the student persisted. For Abrahám, this exchange was something of an eye-opener:

You can be critical only if you have enough knowledge, and then also you need some humility. You can be critical only as part of a dialogue and not be hostile to teacher at any price. (...)

Students often question authority, which is okay, but it is important to try to put in their minds that they should also know things, they should read things, they should study things, they should read lots of things and then they come back and question.

K&K was designed as a thoughtful response to the empty platitudes of the book reviews dominant in the post-communist Slovak academia. In the journal, Abrahám championed his understanding of critical thinking meant to show serious intellectual engagement that requires a 'stamina to read'. He is however worried that in the age of internet this resource is increasingly scarce.

SHL and BISLA were driven by a common philosophy of 'intimate meetings, focussed discussions, and very demanding study' (Abrahám, 2017, p. 119). Abrahám learned the explicit liberal arts practice during the 'Artes Liberales' activities between 1996 and 2001. He has been implementing it as a teaching philosophy of increased engagement: better prepared students would also receive more.

Increased expectations were not without controversies. For example, the Slovak norm was that students 'should take care of themselves', and critics called BISLA's compulsory attendance policy nothing less than 'monitoring adults'. Abrahám disagreed with them on pedagogical grounds: a seminar would never be very good if most students are regularly missing. It also helped students deal with an increased, continuous workload necessary in a liberal arts approach.

A bachelor's degree was still not recognised as a self-standing phase of higher education and Abrahám saw it as a principal limitation for spreading liberal arts in Slovakia and Europe. Students and employers see Bachelor's as more or less an 'incomplete master's', a result of most universities applying only a formal division between the two.

The geographic and disciplinary diversity of students at SHL meant that it had a 'liberal arts atmosphere. (...) It was basically a liberal arts education except in name' (Abrahám, 2017, p. 119). BISLA was more explicitly dedicated to the liberal arts given its almost universal adoption of seminars and direct US inspiration. For Abrahám it was important to think about liberal arts

in terms of pedagogy, not particular disciplines – and this is because liberal arts are always ‘this vague something’, described in ‘the fluffy language’.<sup>96</sup>

### Preferred label

During the 1996 ‘Artes Liberales’ conference, Adam Yarmolinsky used a definition of liberal arts education in the Justice Powell-style (‘I know it when I see it’) and Abrahám thought it was ‘perfect’. SHL did not need to use the concept of liberal arts, but BISLA officially awards a degree in the ‘Study field Liberal Arts and Programme of Political Science’. The double designation was due to legal requirements in Slovakia but Abrahám still finds it helpful: it signals the liberal arts orientation that the graduate schools abroad value, but it also mentions the area of expertise or a major. Since political science in Slovakia is ‘totally devaluated’ as an academic field, Abrahám admits that ‘the last thing I would want to call it is political science or political thought’.

Before 2016, there were policy moves towards recognising a liberal arts degree in the law of higher education. The new government did not continue this line of work. Abrahám thought there was a real potential for spreading liberal arts across existing universities:

I believe that liberal arts should be offered by state universities as a university college concept. Hopefully, we would find a kindred spirits in some of the schools and they will start it, so we wouldn't be alone in Slovakia.

Asked if he considered calling BISLA with a different name, Abrahám was puzzled. The liberal arts should be promoted through repeated use, as ECOLAS does, not avoided or abandoned. The name BISLA was a result of pretty straightforward negotiations with The Endeavor Foundation:

We did not know what to call it. But we agreed to have in the name Bratislava, international and liberal arts -- and there you have it.

<sup>96</sup> Abrahám treated the theoretical discussions in the interview with impatience, but he wrote about the topic at some length (Abrahám, 2012b, 2012a, 2017).

### External purpose

SHL did not have an immediate external purpose; its only goal was to provide a complex understanding of the matters discussed. Tutorials and seminars helped highly motivated students learn across different areas of competence (Abrahám, 2017, p. 104). All students presented and defended their papers at the end of the academic year.

BISLA focussed on explicitly developing intellectual and critical thinking skills as well as engaging in a serious academic work (in a marked contrast to most private higher education institutions in Slovakia). All students take obligatory internships, but their time at BISLA gives them ample opportunities to ponder what matters in both individual and collective life.

Abrahám also ties liberal education to the spread of democracy across the continent.

Europe can benefit from the liberal arts in a variety of ways, including the stress on intellectual skills, the teaching and learning of critical thinking skills, and the emphasis on good teaching methods. The setup of a liberal arts seminar or tutorial offers a space for discussion and dialogue where students can ponder and reflect on issues that the hectic life outside of class does not allow any more. Finally, the liberal arts experience can guide us in carrying our actions that make students' existence meaningful and useful for the society. (...)

Europe will need the skills, character, and judgement of those educated young men and women in the unsettled times ahead to preserve democracy, freedom, and values promoted by a liberal arts education (2017, pp. 116–119).

### Target group

As a private, small, institution dedicated to liberal arts, BISLA finds their education offerings a hard sell on the Slovak market. Adopting a fully English curriculum increased the number of international applicants (some of them with the refugee background), but most students still come from Slovakia. This opens BISLA up to the demographic swings, and to unfavourable competition with public universities in Slovakia and the Czech Republic with free tuition.

Abrahám still thinks that BISLA can attract students due to its teaching philosophy, connections to cultural institutions in Bratislava and Vienna, and the international perspectives for the graduates. Still, many good and English-speaking young Slovaks are easily lured by universities abroad – for Abrahám most such universities are hardly better, they are simply foreign.

SHL 'hand-picked' students of exceptional talent, but BISLA takes in all motivated candidates regardless of their grades. Abrahám was unapologetic about such change:

We do not take the best students. (...) They either become superstars, or they become junkies or burn outs. (...) I'm not even interested in them, the *crème de la crème* will take care of itself.

#### Model alumni

According to Abrahám, BISLA offers the space for growth, and a supportive culture of learning that gives everyone a chance:

We accept those who might not have a very good secondary education but who are willing to work hard. We give them the chance so they can blossom - and that's what happens repeatedly. They have one year to master English and three years to open up and find themselves.

BISLA does not offer many easy introductory courses, and many students do drop out, for a range of reasons: some have discovered a new passion, some did not manage to meet the requirements, some stop showing up to classes. BISLA treasures its academic standards more than tuition income:

In BISLA we have no problem if one third of our students leave.

In the long term, this strategy might pay off as Abrahám spoke with the greatest pride of alumni who pursued good master's programmes abroad – some of them already donated to BISLA.

#### **4.4.2. PRACTICE**

##### Curriculum

SHL accidentally provided a training ground for the future liberal arts curriculum of BISLA:

SHL courses had to be general enough, sophisticated enough, and interesting enough so that all these students from various fields could study that, be attracted and interested in that. We had to basically find courses that were really liberal arts.

Despite the accreditation and the name on the diploma, no more than one third of BISLA curriculum can be classified as political sciences. And even those courses are hardly the usual political science diet, for example 'Shakespeare and politics'. The state requirement is one political philosophy course, BISLA offers between 4 and 6 courses each year. In line with

Abraham's understanding of liberal arts, all courses focus on developing academic skills and employ active pedagogies.

Other courses are scattered across the humanities and social sciences, but not natural sciences due to staffing limitations. A former Slovak PM counts among the teaching faculty in sociology, and some courses originated from students' requests. Minors at BISLA diversify the curriculum and send a message to graduate school admissions committees, even though they are not considered by any Slovak regulations.

The five weeks of a Winter Term in January and February have somewhat special status. During that time, first year students take intensive methodology coursework, while second-years read *The Republic*.

If BISLA annual intake grew to about a hundred, BISLA would offer more minors and between 30 and 35 electives every year, as Abrahám planned from the start. He did not see broad curricular choice as an essential feature of a liberal arts curriculum, but more of a welcome addition to the existing setup. He was also considering launching a PhD programme.

### Pedagogy

For Abrahám, the liberal arts approach concerns teaching authors and ideas in context – and it is the pedagogy that matters the most:

It's a method of teaching to me, more than the subject, that is important.

A seminar offers a cornerstone of a liberal arts learning environment: a small class where the teacher and the students engage in dialogue on a much more equal footing than in a lecture hall. The challenge is that a seminar can only work if students come prepared for all classes – and this, Abrahám admitted, is still a challenge in Slovakia.

### Community

Abrahám claimed that the communal spirit of joint learning and the faculty advocating on behalf of their students were unheard of in Slovakian higher education before:

I would invite actually some students to write reviews for K&K (...) Who would publish a review of Nietzsche's book of a 19-year old, 20-year old student in a respected journal? But I did, and when they were applying for some scholarships, it really helped them.

Later on, Abrahám and to The Endeavor Foundation saw the classroom dynamics of SHL as evidence of the right type of a learning community being developed:

They saw that this is a truly liberal arts -- because it wasn't just the topic or the subject but the way the students interacted, the size, the excitement, the common eagerness and hunger for knowledge by students. It was very palpable in those seminars by these gifted students from all over Slovakia, hailing from various universities where they studied their boring subjects in a boring way. At SHL all of a sudden, they found this atmosphere of great excitement and camaraderie.

Initially, Abrahám hoped that BISLA would be a residential college. When he realised this was not financially viable, he at least arranged for the college garden to hold classes in the warmer months. Bratislava is 'an ideal-sized city for a college', and very affordable for the students to come to the 'concerts, opera, theatres or to the rehearsals with our instructors'. The proximity of Vienna and Budapest enhances the offer through both study trips and extracurricular activities. Partnerships with cultural institutions make BISLA stand out from the crowd:

We can bring actors, directors here. In 'Shakespeare and politics', the students would read the play that is being rehearsed in the National Theatre and then the director or actors would come in and they would debate their work with our students.

#### **4.4.3. BACKGROUND**

##### Personal motivation

In Canada Abrahám studied Sovietology, and after 1989 he was eager to see the democratic transformation of his country up close. While teaching at the Comenius University for one semester each year, he quickly realised the power of its bureaucratic structure and the pedagogical monoculture of boring lectures.

I also observed the syllabi of my colleagues that were almost encyclopaedias of their subject but did not mention that some of the books or things clashed with each other or build upon each other.

In Vienna, Abrahám raised money to start bilingual K&K wherein he hoped to publicise the debates between books and thinkers. Up until then, Slovak book reviews were ‘personally praising or personally destroying’, which made them a ‘very superficial, boring, and dry’ read. Abrahám believed an alternative is possible:

My intention was to build an archaeology of critical thinking. [For me] book reviewing meant taking some of these famous books that were just translated into our language and showing how that book sailed from 50s, 60s, 70s, until today. [And then showing] how it started an earthquake or how some parts are now obsolete because there are other books that that came subsequently after it, but without that original book, there wouldn't be the earthquake.

In mid 1990s, most such works were still ‘unknown to many scholars in the post-communist countries’. SHL and BISLA followed the same intellectual ambition: to introduce the students to the ‘intricate ways how scholarship works’ in the humanities, in philosophy, and in the broader social sciences of the West.

### American connections

In 1995, Péter Hunčík, a Slovak-Hungarian intellectual and businessman approached Abrahám asking him to set up a Slovak chapter of the Invisible College as a ‘very loose franchise’. Given the considerable autonomy and seed funding from George Soros’s Open Society Foundation, Abrahám found the offer very attractive:

I was free to shape it. I could choose people and decide what we teach, how we teach, how we select students, what fields we concentrate in. It was great and liberating to create an institution of such kind.

Abrahám was keen on maintaining distance to the sister association, hence the name SHL.

In October 1996, Abrahám was invited to a Budapest symposium of around 100 Europeans from CEE countries and about 30 senior administrators from the US colleges to discuss the concept of liberal education and its role for civil society in the region. The conference gave birth to the steering committee which soon adopted the name ‘Artes Liberales’. Nicholas Farnham, leading the Educational Leadership Programme of The Endeavor Foundation, coordinated its activities, while Adam Yarmolinsky was ‘the intellectual powerhouse’. This informal association exchanged information about existing liberal arts programmes in the region in order to better understand similarities and differences with experiences in the U.S.

Abrahám first met Endeavor's president, Julie Kidd, during the second 'Artes Liberales' conference in Budapest in 1998 and have remained in contact ever since. After the initial funding for SHL ended, Abrahám raised the required funds himself, with The Endeavor Foundation contributing from 2002 onwards.

Around mid-2000s, Abrahám felt that SHL had 'fulfilled its mission'. His ambition was to start a dual degree programme with a US liberal arts college and Kidd helped organise meetings with potentially interested institutions, sometimes travelling together with Abrahám (Abrahám, 2017). Back then he felt that existing study abroad programmes were not fulfilling its potential: the students are either isolated in the 'Mediterranean villas' of those wealthy American colleges or are lost in the machinery of big universities in major European cities. Abrahám convinced the Bratislava mayor, Andrej Ďurkovič, to promise a historic building for the new college if he found an interested partner institution. The negotiations did not, however, produce any results and Abrahám now thinks that it was due to the high cost of a dual degree. When this happened, Endeavor stepped in in the most generous way:

When I failed to find a partner from America to start a campus, the Foundation said that we should start a college on our own and then they would support it. That we should seek accreditation.

The implementation of the Bologna Reforms allowed higher education institutions to only offer a Bachelor's degree, which made the plan possible. When BISLA opened in 2006, SHL concluded its activities. The Foundation transferred the ownership of the building directly to BISLA and covers around 80% of operational costs until this day (the remainder is tuition income and private gifts).

### European connections

The steering committee of 'Artes Liberales' consisted of about a dozen of educational leaders, including Axer. In the late 200s, before the common higher education framework of the Bologna Process, however:

There was very little we could commonly strive for. Besides, the concept of liberal arts was new to us.

Abrahám noted with some surprise that the committee was completely unaware of the concurrent developments by Adriaansens which were quite impactful:

Adriaansens had the institutional backing and governmental financial backing, so he could start a University College Utrecht, whereas we continued outside the educational system.

Established in 2007, ECOLAS is 'a very loose network', and a 'cooperation' that works primarily through individual liaisons at each institution. Abrahám approached most of the programmes himself, but he also accepted external requests. There is 'no screening process (...) because we have a common interest'. ECOLAS membership grew by 10 institutions after Julie J. Kidd Travel Research Fellowships were first offered in 2015.

Abrahám believes that he and fellow liberal educators created an early foundation for the broader adoption of the liberal arts

We produced this liberal arts model before most Europeans knew they needed it themselves (Abrahám, 2017, p. 119).

Now, as the number of liberal arts programmes increases, Abrahám believes that a more elaborate definition of what it entails would now be 'useful'. He recalled how during the BISLA accreditation panel one of the members had accused his institution of political liberalism; a popular misconception that shows that ELE in general would benefit from a more clear understanding among the reading public. At the same time, Abrahám dismissed the worries such a definition could create a common standard for the liberal arts in Europe, referring to the BLASTER project he then led:

One of the BLASTER pillars is the quality standards, but that's just to assess how to judge, how can we preserve diversity of our institutions and still call it a liberal arts programme. (...)

If there ever will be [a standard], that's in the future. First, you have to create the network, create the programmes and schools. Only then perhaps there will be some guidance as to what the liberal arts in Europe should be like.



#### **4.5. NIKOLAY KOPOSOV. SMOLNY COLLEGE, RUSSIA**

##### Bios

Nikolay Kopusov (\*1955) obtained his terminal degree in medieval history from Leningrad State University in 1980. Two years later, he and his future wife, classical and cultural scholar Dina Khapaeva (\*1963) left for Paris where they worked with members of the Annales School. After scholarships to UK, Germany and later Hungary, they returned to St. Petersburg in 1995, where they initially run the seminar on the critique of social sciences at their alma mater, renamed Saint Petersburg State University (SPSU).

Valery Monakhov, moving to SPSU from Herzen Pedagogical University, and Gennady Shkliarevsky from Bard College (NY, USA), joined Kopusov in drafting a plan for a series of elective courses for SPSU students launched in 1997. Two years later, the full liberal arts curriculum was offered by a newly created Smolny College within the Faculty of Philology. Kopusov became the Dean, Khapaeva was responsible for research, fundraising, and internationalisation.

As historians and public intellectuals, Kopusov and Khapaeva defended academic freedom and the right for an open debate on the memory of Stalinism. In 2009 they left Russia, first for Helsinki and eventually for the US, where they now work at Emory and Georgia Tech, respectively.<sup>97</sup>

##### Institutional profile

Smolny College was established in 1999 as a joint venture of the SPSU and Bard College. The four-year bachelor's programme was officially called 'Arts and Humanities' and operates on a dual-degree basis (U.S. B.A. and a Russian state diploma). . US government agencies and private US foundations supported the project financially. Most courses are taught in Russian; five master's programmes were introduced more recently. In 2011, Smolny moved to the renovated 18<sup>th</sup> century Bobrinsky Palace, upgraded to the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and appointed Alexei Kudrin as Dean.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>97</sup> Kopusov and Khapaeva are authors of the following LE-relevant publication: (Kopusov and Khapaeva, 2001).

<sup>98</sup> A liberal politician and former long-term Deputy Prime-Minister and Minister of Finance of the Russian Federation.

#### 4.5.1. THEORY

##### Conceptual understanding

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian universities found themselves in a mission vacuum and Koposov hoped that they could restore their relevance through liberal arts. He understood the liberal arts ideal as nothing less than an across-the-board intellectual transformation:

[It was] an intellectual, educational, social, and cultural dream at the same time. For me, all those things are absolutely inseparable.

For Khapaeva, liberal arts was a political and cultural project linked to the appreciation of freedom and democracy, a distaste for authoritarianism, and a community of intellectually independent, politically responsible subjects. Koposov added that the liberal arts ideal must include the high intellectual culture of the humanities, the social sciences, and at least some of the natural sciences.

Even though liberal arts might be primarily American today, for Koposov they originate from the old Europe of the German research university and as such are inextricably linked to both philosophical and scientific exploration. This component, which Koposov called *Wissenschaft* or *Bildung*, is good for both students and professors in the liberal arts institution, regardless of the fact that the subsequent professionalisation of the research university brought ‘many of the familiar problems’.

There is some room and even necessity for conceptualising teaching, at least at the university level, and research as aspects of more or less the same enterprise. Basically, it's impossible to think of this kind of self-perfection through learning if you don't really read serious academic texts. And it is also a civic duty of a professor to write clearly, so that students can understand your research.

For all his research sympathies, Koposov opposed the introduction of masters' programmes at Smolny as one, financially unhelpful, and two, a distortion of ‘the main mission’. Bard supported the plan, as graduate programs improved the standing of Smolny at SPSU – a consideration that eventually prevailed.

Monakhov, Koposov and Shkliarevsky first conceived of Smolny as ‘basically Bard in Russia’, a more or less equal partnership between a renowned research university and a rapidly internationalising liberal arts college. With its Western orientation and a growing civil society of a newly established democracy in the background background, Smolny was an attractive

cause for American sponsors but at the same time alienated some in the Petersburg professoriate.

Koposov was 'the face looking West' in Smolny administration, but as a Dean was responsible to design an operating model that included certain cultural and social adjustments of the Bard blueprint. He recalled that Shkliarevsky treated liberal arts pedagogy as 'a kind of a Bible', especially seeing the introduction of student centred-education in Russia as his 'personal vocation'. Monakhov was the natural diplomat working with 'academic political leadership' of SPSU.

The introduction of non-professional, generalist curriculum in an established, traditional university was dependent on internal allies. The then rector, Ludmila Verbitskaya, and some senior professors from science faculties were instrumental in garnering support. Eventually, the Academic Senate of SPSU voted 95-1 in favour of creating Smolny.

At that time in Russia everything seemed possible.

#### Preferred label

Smolny officially offered an 'Arts and Humanities' degree,<sup>99</sup> first as part of the Philological Faculty, and since 2011 as an independent 'Faculty of Liberal Arts and Humanities'.<sup>100</sup> The name 'Arts and Humanities' was less confusing in Russian than 'liberal arts and sciences', and broad enough to attract students. Some people misconceived Smolny as an art department -- to some extent Bard probably hoped it would become one -- and Koposov recalled the misconception was ironically 'a very strong argument in our favour'.<sup>101</sup> The official name was however misleading as it disregarded the social science and science courses which Smolny offered and required.

The concept was that all those things are in perfect balance. Not that arts are our focus and everything else comes as just extra stuff. For us, it was important to have a formula that would be as broad as possible.

Internally, Smolny's ethos or mission was often termed simply the 'Liberal Arts' approach.<sup>102</sup>

The liberal arts, I believe, is the only formula which would work -- and it works in Russian better than in English, because it has no customary

<sup>99</sup> Iskusstva i Gumanitarnye Nauki.

<sup>100</sup> Svobodnykh Iskusstv i Gumanitarnykh Nauk.

<sup>101</sup> SPSU ultimately established a separate art department under prof. Valery Gergiev, the world-famous orchestra conductor.

<sup>102</sup> Svobodnye Isskustva.

connotations. It's a new term. You can put in, if not any content, at least almost any content that you want.

From among the alternative names, 'liberal education',<sup>103</sup> would suggest political schools for liberals or 'a teaching-oriented enterprise', which Smolny was not. The Latin 'Artes Liberales' would be 'vague and metaphorical'.<sup>104</sup> While Koposov partially agreed that Smolny offered a 'liberal organisation of studies' he was quick to note that 'nobody would use such words in Russian'. For her own purposes, Khapaeva called it 'liberal education, with an emphasis on the word liberal', because to her Smolny offered a politically liberal education. Students were to 'learn to appreciate the value of freedom and democracy, and study how to fight for it'. Koposov agreed in personal capacity, but not as a dean:

You just say, 'We are liberals'. For me, it's an advantage. But given that it was not a common expression, Arts and Humanities were an acceptable compromise.

#### External purpose

In the 1990s, it was 'not totally impossible' that Russia would remain a democratic society, which Koposov saw as a precondition of any liberal education. The liberal arts offered an 'underappreciated intellectual paradigm' for higher education, allowing the daily academic activities of research and teaching to have a cultural, social, and political impact. Koposov and Khapaeva argued that the social sciences were in crisis due to their increased disinterest in and irrelevance for the social world they were tasked to describe.

The 'Critique of the social sciences' seminar was born of this consideration and became an early precursor of Smolny – it preceded Bard's interest in the project. Later, it came to serve as a primary recruitment tool for Smolny faculty and was incorporated in Smolny Collegium.<sup>105</sup> The seminar provided a space for a collective reflection in the hope of generating 'a completely new intellectual environment that nourishes the educational system'.<sup>106</sup> Practically, this meant that universities were to leave the ivory tower, face the needs of society, and change the world around them. Koposov argued that they could only do that by blending teaching with research in a spirit of interdisciplinarity and global problems.

<sup>103</sup> Либеральное Образование.

<sup>104</sup> Smolny uses it now for their international conferences.

<sup>105</sup> A research centre created by Khapaeva after the Stanford Humanities Center model.

<sup>106</sup> Smolny Collegium was supported by the Carnegie Foundation, and later by the Ford and MacArthur Foundations, but was plagued by the funding limitations and political changes of the 2000s that made Russia less attractive to international scholars.

We needed a kind of liberal arts version for organisation of research. (...) for all my loyalty to Bard, Reed College was the best model for me because it is largely focussed on educating future researchers.

This broadly conceived liberal arts approach was a response to what Kuposov and Khapaeva termed the 'ideology of professionalism': effectively, an ideological compromise between the professoriate and party apparatchiks during the Soviet period. Academics abandoned any potentially political agenda in exchange for a relative professional autonomy; the academic culture touted the narrow reproduction of specialists with an unshakeable pride stemming from their disconnection from the outside world:

I think that the ideological expression of this compromise, at least in the Soviet system, was that 'we train linguists'. We train historians of antiquity. We train our students to become like ourselves. I'm your professor – I'm your ideal. – I hate that. I still hate that.

One would have thought that after 1991 the reasons for the compromise disappeared, but the ideology of professionalism did not lose its appeal. The technical competence in a hollowed out, socially irrelevant idea was still the pinnacle of academic achievement. Khapaeva explained that academics defended their worth behind 'the iron curtain of their specialised knowledge' while attacking any engaged or applicable knowledge as dilettantism.<sup>107</sup>

Smolny attacked the ideology of professionalism on all counts. It sought to instil interdisciplinary horizons in well-rounded individuals, thus preparing a new intelligentsia that would embrace the democratic responsibility. Khapaeva wanted Smolny to 'vaccinate the students from the appeal of authoritarianism of all sorts', to produce 'independent intellectuals and politically responsible subjects' who would 'intervene in politics and help to sustain democracy'.

Smolny did not reject the depth of knowledge in principle, but concurrently it was concerned about the breadth and relevance necessary to maintain direction and balance. Kuposov said that the distinction was 'of course, formal, but not so badly translatable'. For example, Smolny offered a set of core courses, but it also offered a range of majors (concentrations). Students took fewer courses in their majors than students in other departments, and for this reason were sometimes accused of being only half-professionals. Kuposov rejected this as for him the goal of undergraduate education is to learn 'not necessarily the entire system of knowledge, but basic skills'.

<sup>107</sup> 'Diletantstvo'.

Koposov initially hoped that that the 'system of liberal education' would spread from Smolny to other universities. In line with the wider democratisation of political life in Russia, Smolny touted curricular choice requiring individual responsibility, the market mechanism of course evaluations and an elective registration, as well as a non-token student representation in the academic council. Koposov's favourite academic policy was moderation (modelled after Bard), in which students had to publicly present and defend their major/concentration choices to a faculty commission. The procedure went as follows:

You take one of your essays that you have just written for a class and you have a long, long introduction that describes, in general, your experience of the first two years in the college and your plans for the future. Which courses you have taken, what you have learned, what do you think your mistakes were, which courses you are planning to take, what is your long-term goal. Then the committee very gently discusses it with the student.

The political situation in Russia was visibly deteriorating in the mid-2000s, even though interventions in academic matters were still rare. Koposov and Khapaeva decided to leave the country once they felt the conditions too clearly remind them of a country they fled in the 1980s. Khapaeva believes that Smolny no longer lives up to the initial vision.

The whole idea of what we wanted it to be is completely spoiled, compromised, perverted. [I long thought that] we trained some decent people, created probably something. But even this illusion has passed now. We haven't created anything lasting. (...) Probably the identity of Smolny as it has been conceived initially should have been erased under a new regime, so we had to be erased as well.

#### Target group

Koposov elaborated on the admissions procedures but did not offer a clear student profile. He was of the opinion that Smolny's conception of 'Arts and Humanities' was understandable to no more than 1-5% of the population. This might sound like a small number, but Smolny only needed 150 students in a country of 150 million people:

There was a proportion of people who were ready to listen that the Russian system is not always perfect, [that] there are other models, and these models are perhaps, more technologically advanced. This was a discourse which was met positively, not by majority of parents, but by a sufficient proportion of parents.

According to admissions surveys, Smolny attracted students first of all by the state university diploma, the relationship with SPSU, and the reputation of the Philological Faculty (over 80%). The dual degree was 'important, but not decisive' (20%). Since Smolny was recruiting through a Philological faculty, most of its candidates were also female. All candidates had to write an essay to prove they could 'write well and be good students in the liberal arts college'. The quality of candidates improved after the unified state exams were introduced.

Students from academically-educated families might have been slightly overrepresented, but never a majority.<sup>108</sup> State-subsidised places received up to 5 applicants per spot, while the tuition-carrying places were less competitive; Smolny offered scholarships to the best students in the latter category to reduce the nominally high tuition. Koposov noted that students from other cities might have been systematically excluded due to the high costs of living in Saint Petersburg.

### Model alumni

Khapaeva hoped that Smolny students would learn about the various paradigms of the modern humanities and eventually transcend academic education to become 'well-rounded individuals of unrestrained personality'. As the planned economy, with its discrete training pathways and guaranteed employment, was being replaced by the free market, the need for lifelong learning and flexibility became obvious, calling for the new type of academic preparation. This argument worked for various foundations:

The case that Nikolay and I made, saying that, 'Oh no, no, no, people are so dissatisfied by the old model, this is a completely new country, things have changed so much, education should catch up and deliver a new product', so that was how we sort of worked with them and persuaded them.

Smolny students were expected to be versed in research, oriented towards problems and interdisciplinary horizons, and demonstrate broad learning alongside academic skills. Alumni were supposed to be professionally trained but not forgetful about the global concerns of societal relevance. The goal was that they not just adapt to the world, but change it.

Critics argued that Smolny alumni would be 'good for nothing' because they would lack the mastery of a clearly defined subject. Khapaeva replied that, behind the façade of rigorous intellectual training, such critics simply wanted to mould students into 'little doubles of themselves', as in this anecdote.

<sup>108</sup> NB: Kposov's two daughters graduated from Smolny, and the third one from Emory University.

We were eating dinner together and then this famous professor said 'I will take those seventeen years old youngsters and turn them into linguists'. And there was a kind of devilish spark in his eyes. I felt sorry for the students immediately.

Koposov extended this critique further:

For me, what's really important, is that students become what THEY want to become, that they develop their personalities in a way that is most natural for them. That they try to understand the social environment, determined by the global problems of today's world.

Some Smolny alumni might still become researchers, but hopefully most would go elsewhere: as institution builders, businessmen and businesswomen, or 'whatever they please'. What really mattered was that they self-actualise and reach their full potential.

Without pretending to change the entire planet, I think that what Smolny really wanted to achieve, was to contribute to the development of an educational environment in which our students would know that they have worked to become human beings or individuals or global citizens -- but not historians of ancient Greece or the like.

#### **4.5.2. PRACTICE**

##### Curriculum

All Russian curricula require that a student takes a course from the opposite field of knowledge, but this a formal requirement is not taken serious by either the teachers or the students. Smolny introduced a larger and non-trivial distribution requirement, selectively adapting the Bard curriculum for what was possible and desirable within SPSU.

The limited research capacity of Bard meant that in the early days Smolny paid more attention to teaching. But with a track record of innovative research at SPSU, it would be unwise not to benefit from this ethos, too. Koposov filtered it through the Smolny Collegium and eventually implemented interdisciplinary courses, with certain limitations. For example, Khapaeva wanted to avoid having a 'homemade science' department at Smolny, when its students could easily go to existing labs at SPSU.

The First Year Seminar followed the Reed College model: all students read the same set of readings in 7-8 concurrent groups taught by a classicist, a political scientist, a cultural historian, a linguist, or a literary scholar. A variation on the great books course theme, Smolny downsized the ancient Greek texts to one semester (Koposov thought that 'two would be excessive') and

covered European 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century works in the second term. First Year Seminars were designed to ease new students into higher education, expose them to the complexity of the world and develop their academic skills. Khapaeva liked their mode of delivery as a tool for developing critical thinking:

The idea was that we don't answer questions for you. We just puzzle you, shock you.

Smolny offered many courses as well as the majors to choose from – Kopusov urged students to 'think 10 times before choosing' and then bear the responsibility for it. Over time, Smolny moved from the disciplinary language (e.g. taking classes in history), to the 'intellectual capacities that those courses can help develop' (e.g. thinking historically). Chaos Theory courses were an attempt to adapt the curriculum for a multicultural world, and the parallel collapse of grand narratives in humanities and social sciences.

Kopusov explained that extracurricular civic engagement would be reminiscent of the loathed communist 'public service' activities and never work in Russia. Instead, he introduced 'Schwerpunkte', a thematically connected cluster of courses focussing on a problem that 'everybody has to face as human beings, citizens, and professionals'. Each term 3-5 new courses directly dealt with one issue, while many others addressed it less directly in the syllabus. For example, in 2001 Smolny discussed totalitarianism, which was a reaction to the changing attitude of students.<sup>109</sup> At the same time, Smolny avoided directly discussing politically hot topics, for example the war in Chechnya, as Kopusov saw them as strategically unfeasible and pedagogically less viable than big concepts. Human rights were however taught, not only as a separate human rights minor, but also as a topic covered in some 15-20 courses across the curriculum. The issue was understood in a broad manner, with the course on the great writers addressing their view of a human being, rather than a narrow legal or political concept.

### Pedagogy

Kopusov saw the main pedagogical benefit of the liberal arts approach in countering the preponderance of passive learning as is typical for lectures. Shkliarevsky proselytised about the student-centred education which he had practiced at Bard. Smolny introduced course evaluations, almost unprecedented in the Russian system, and used them in hiring. The use of final exams was limited, and when they happened, they could not carry more than 50% of the

<sup>109</sup> Kopusov noticed then that first-year students did not get his Soviet jokes and had started to believe in omnipresent foreign influences.

final grade. Being part of the research university was something of a mixed blessing, as many faculty were primarily good researchers – to boost the value of teaching, Smolny awarded an annual best teaching prize.

For the Smolny team the interest in pedagogy was very often secondary. Or, at least, was very closely interwoven with the interest in reform of interdisciplinary research, opening to the broader problems.

Koposov attempted to convince some faculty to replace encyclopaedic syllabi with a more realistic and outcome driven approach, with mixed results. Students were more effectively pushing for a better teaching by voting with their feet: ‘the market has a democratic potential’. The faculty commission at Smolny reviewed all syllabi every year to insist on the liberal arts approach. Even high-ranking professors were not spared from teaching first-year courses.

The fondness for seminars rather than lectures raised some eyebrows. One ‘brilliant historian of Ancient Greece’, during an SPSU Academic Senate, delivered a very long, Ciceronian-style speech called ‘On the lecture as the main form of teaching in the university’.

It was directed against us. At some point later, we managed to make him work for us. But still, of course, his ideology was lecture -- not learning.

Teaching at Smolny aimed at delivering academically demanding and socially relevant curriculum through seminars touching upon the wide ranging, contemporary issues. While Smolny faculty wanted to avoid lecturing, Koposov admitted that ‘nobody knew how to do that’, even faculty with American PhDs. The quality of staff was ‘on par with the best Russian universities’, but the default model of a Russian-style seminar consisted of a technical dissection of textual artefacts. For all its value, it was nothing like the discussions Koposov now expects from teaching at an American research university. This was ‘a little special situation’ in which faculty were also ‘students’.

All of us had to learn how to do that, and everybody accepted this obligation to learn. We were having various discussions, seminars, retreats to that purpose.

The obligatory coursework was less than in a regular university program, but Smolny compensated with an expectation of increased individual work in the library or at home. The library prepared all course materials for the students and the staff. Financially, hiring ‘top-

notch' faculty to run small classes of 15-20 students made Smolny expensive. Koposov hoped to double the enrolment to 800-1000 or about half the size of Bard.<sup>110</sup>

### Community

Unlike Bard, Smolny had no self-contained campus. Since it occupied a building in the centre of a major cultural and historical city, Koposov thought that 'it would be stupid not to profit from that.' Khapaeva revealed they considered moving Smolny to a suburban campus until around 2004, when the first stage of renovations at the Bobrinsky Palace was completed. Without a dormitory on the site, local students lived with their families, while those from other cities lived either in the university accommodation at the outskirts or sharing apartments in the city. Many faculty worked only part-time at Smolny, but Koposov doubted this necessarily meant a diminished student experience.

It depends more on people than on anything else, so also on the intentions, culture, institutional climate. Even at a self-standing liberal arts college you might find a professor who would never talk to a student. At Smolny we had those grand princes, but they were all exceptions rather than the rule. We also had professors who really spent hours and hours trying to really communicate to attract students, some were tremendously successful. They were very accessible and enjoyed it. Of course, the majority was in between the two extremes.

Many of such 'local cult figures' enhanced the reputation of Smolny in academic circles. Koposov assessed that his teachers took more interest in students, even if 'they would never be 'as attentive to the job as American professors are', which is a matter of the broader social structure:

If you see that professor is a relaxed person, who spends his office hours entertaining students in the cafeteria, it's a strong message about his qualifications. If you see that there are professors who really care about you and their job, it's education completely of different way. Education is not only about how bright are those people who teach you, though it's a crucial point. It's not only about what information you get, not about skills you develop, that's also largely about how your educational milieu functions socially and prepares you for living in a creative kind of society.

<sup>110</sup> Koposov estimated that the faculty-student ratio should grow from 1:7 to 1:12 or, better, 1:15 to make Smolny sustainable financially and still pedagogically viable.

Khapaeva emphasized an 'alternative institutional culture, where people are respectful of others and cherish their feeling of self-respect' and Koposov conceded this type of institutional culture might be partially credited with Smolny's long-term success. Students learned the difference immediately after graduation, when they had to visit central administration to collect their final diplomas. Disinterested, rude university staff were for them a novum. Small wonder that Khapaeva called their belief in the survival of such a community in Russia flat-out naïve.

#### **4.5.3. BACKGROUND**

##### Personal motivation

'We came back to Petersburg in 1995 with an expectation that we will do something important', recalled Koposov, the first project being 'a comparative dictionary of basic terms in history'. The 'Critique' seminar promoted an 'anthropological or systematic, critical interdisciplinary approach to historiography and social sciences'. Khapaeva still thinks it was extremely successful.

It was a completely new idea for everyone in Russia that social sciences are in crisis, the collapse of the great paradigms was also a recent phenomenon, and a recent idea, and people got really very engaged. The initial circle of faculty who became core faculty of Smolny was formed around the seminar - and around the idea that Russia can become a democratic country.

Sergey Bogdanov, a long-time friend of Monakhov and Koposov, was an early ally who later became the Dean of the Philology department. The trio started fundraising for Smolny in 1997, in the hope of eventual all-university transformation that was not to be. Koposov enjoyed his administrative responsibilities, having been an Associate Dean in the 1980s.

Some kind of academic leadership was a role which I was very comfortable with for myself. I liked it and somehow spontaneously was interested in improving things as a social creature. So, from this point of view and I always wanted to be a Dean.

##### American connections

Shkliarevsky, a former dissident from Kiev and a professor of history at Bard College, 'wanted to return back to Russia and contribute to the realisation of the dreams that dissidents had'. In the early 1990s he was organising summer language schools as Herzen Pedagogical State

University, where he met Monakhov – a fellow historian and a vice-rector for internationalisation. When Monakhov moved to SPSU, they started discussing the creation of a ‘Mini-Bard in Russia’ with Kopusov.

Some people used to take this idea more literally, some were more flexible about that – as always happens -- but more or less everybody was to some extent into that.

But it would not be possible to recreate ‘the whole system of social relationships’ of an American college: fundraising, civic engagement, and the residential component. American professors at liberal arts institutions teach more, because they are employed full time, and paid much better than was realistic in Smolny case. But culture mattered, too: Russian professors lacked ‘the tradition of working hard and approaching teaching with professionalism’. For all those limitations, Kopusov thought of Smolny faculty members as ‘almost just as good’ as those teaching at Bard or now at Emory.

Bard offered their full support to the Smolny team, but still wanted the latter to pursue potential donors on their own. Early grants came to Smolny from The Open Society Foundation,<sup>111</sup> but also from the US Department of State (through the United States Information Agency), the Carnegie Foundation, the Mellon Foundation (for the Bard-Smolny virtual campus), the Gagarin Trust and two Moscow branches of the MacArthur Foundation (history education; higher education reform),<sup>112</sup> and finally the Ford Foundation (for the human rights programme at Smolny).

After Smolny was in place, Bard ‘supervised from some distance’. Shkliarevsky became Bard Representative with veto powers, contributing especially to recruitment and curriculum development. Bard professors attended retreats, helped develop the moderation process, taught courses through the virtual campus, and helped launch the undergraduate research conference. Members of the board of overseers and some Bard donors also made sizeable dollar gifts to Smolny. But given the costs of operation and renovation of a historical palace, Smolny built little endowment.

<sup>111</sup> In the start-up years of Smolny, Peter Darvas [HESP director 1995-1998], Nandini Ramanujam [director 1999-2001], and Rhett Bowlin [director 2001-2010, deputy director 1996-2001], were in charge of the Higher Education Support Program at the Open Society Foundation. The Russian chapter of OSI (closed in 2003), led by Ekaterina Ghenieva, director of Innostranna Literatura, the Library of Foreign Literature in Moscow, had different priorities, but Ghenieva became relatively good friends with Khapaeva and Kopusov.

<sup>112</sup> According to Khapaeva, the second grant was later rejected by the incoming rector of SPSU who disliked Smolny.

During the 1990s, American engagement was seen very positively in Russia. Smolny was initially 'rather welcome in academic quarters', though there were exceptions:

Kontowski: Were you not afraid that is an American transplant or a new colonialism?

Koposov: Very few people in Russia, at least among Smolny faculty, would ever use these terms. Only communists spoke about colonialism back then. (...) My former boss, Igor Froyanov, the dean of the department of history, said during a University Senate meeting in 1999 that behind nice facets of Bard College there are quite different organisations hidden, meaning CIA of course.

Koposov believed that the personal commitment of the Bard people (especially Jonathan Becker and Susan Gillespie) was 'absolutely crucial for the project'. Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College, was 'all the time very much present, intellectually and socially. He didn't miss any single commencement in Petersburg in June'. Almost 50 people were variously involved in various stages of creating Smolny, some of them from 'various Soros structures', making it a 'quite considerable and international entity'. As Smolny matured and became more confident, the institution started to develop more independently of Bard, but the dual degree remained 'the very foundation of Smolny'.<sup>113</sup>

Relations between Bard and SPSU were naturally complex and involved occasional compromises. Khapaeva saw the initial approach by Bard as driven by the prestige of a Russian university, not without American fundraising goals in mind. In the mid-1990s, Bard representatives claimed to bring the idea of human rights to Russia, which puzzled Khapaeva since for the first time in history Russia was a relatively liberal, free, democratic country. Both Koposov and Khapaeva did not feel Smolny should 'imitate Bard' too closely or it will hire the best academics only to restrict their research zeal. In principle, Koposov appreciated small, self-standing US liberal arts colleges like Bard, but his ideal was a liberal arts college as the 'core element' of the research university setting. 'A matter of a little bit of personal taste.'

<sup>113</sup> Smolny was quite committed to its Russian language identity: only about 7% courses were offered in English, mostly by visiting professors, while exchange students, mostly from Bard network, were taking language courses in Russian.

## European connections

Asked about similar developments, Koposov immediately mentioned the European University in St. Petersburg (EUSP), perhaps because Leo Klejn and Nikolay Vakhtin,<sup>114</sup> shared with him the idea of creating a graduate institution which would promote high quality research back in 1990s. Koposov was then still in Paris. He saw the idea as ‘good and important’, but thought it ‘could be a little more open towards more modern ways of thinking about education’ in the ways Koposov pursued them with the Smolny project. Interestingly, today Koposov is more sympathetic towards the traditional academic culture embodied in EUSP, partially because he saw the several hundred researchers produced by the institution who are now ‘really the best in their generation in Russia’.

Through the Open Society Foundation, Koposov knew of Abrahám, Yehuda Elkana at Central European University, Sophie Howlett and other ‘very brilliant people’ from the Higher Education Support Program who visited Smolny. From 1998 onwards Koposov was part of the ‘Artes Liberales’ Association,<sup>115</sup> remembering fondly Julia Stefanova and Axer. Koposov was impressed by the ‘amazing’ MISH students who attended the 1998 ‘Artes Liberales’ conference:

I've never seen students of such kind. Fluent English, intelligently looking, fantastic... who really think, write highly impressive things, react and are acquainted to this new kind of discussion with professors from other universities, that was really brilliant.

Koposov was a little sceptical with regards to the European Humanities University, even though it was an important and visible institution. After the forced closure of EHU in Minsk in 2004, some students were transferred to Smolny. Smolny used Bard Network connection to establish a small exchange program with the American University in Central Asia. While he heard ‘good things’ about European College of Liberal Arts, he never able to pay a visit.

<sup>114</sup> Klejn is a world-famous archaeologist, and Vakhtin an acclaimed linguist. Ironically, in mid-2017 EUSP has been deprived of its teaching license in a political attack. All graduate students transferred elsewhere, and the university also lost its historical building.

<sup>115</sup> In 1999, Koposov attended a related seminar for college presidents in the US, and in 2000 he gave a keynote at the final conference of the association.

## Postscriptum

Khapaeva: For us, Smolny crossed the Rubicon in 2007. (...) Nikolay came up with this idea of putting together huge international conference with an innocent title: 'Education and Democracy'. He went to see two university bosses and they looked at him and said, 'Well, democracy, it's not a catch phrase any longer' (laughter). (...)

Bard didn't want us to leave. Bard wanted to keep us as public intellectuals, which we were at a time in Russia. (...)

In 2007, and I will never forget it, we went on a trip to the US and met with someone from the top-ranking administrators at Bard.

We came to talk to him about the political pressure and how bad it's becoming, how it perverts the institution, how dangerous the whole situation is institutionally, politically, academically, etc. for Smolny.

He looked at us and said 'Look, that's all good what you are telling'. (He loves to be paradoxical). 'Because, you know, as democracy shuts down in Russia, Smolny college soon will become the only girl to dance in Russian-American relations'. (long pause)

So here is the title for the Smolny adventure: The Only Girl to Dance (laughter).

#### **4.6. LEIF BORGERT. UNIVERSITY COLLEGE GOTLAND, SWEDEN**

##### Bio

Leif Borgert (\*1943) grew up in Dalarna and initially studied chemistry, but moved to the Stockholm School of Economics and graduated with an MSc in Business Administration and Economics from in 1968. For two decades he worked in the local administration, health care, and forestry industry as a specialist in management and organisation, and later run a consulting company.

In 1988 Borgert returned to academia as a senior lecturer at the University College Dalarna. He was awarded a PhD in organisation theory from Stockholm University in 1992. After a year back in the local administration, he was nominated as a Deputy Rector of Dalarna University and subsequently assumed the Rector's position in November 1997.

In 2003 Borgert was appointed Rector of University College Gotland and prepared a reorganisation of the institution towards a liberal arts education model. When his term concluded in 2008, Borgert retired and focussed on his jazz band.<sup>116</sup>

##### Institutional profile

University College Gotland (UCG)<sup>117</sup> started in 1998 as an independent university college in a refurbished whiskey distillery in Visby, the capital of Gotland. The regional university had a limited research profile but was known for some untraditional study programmes, for example game design and digital humanities. Around 2006 UCG initiated the curriculum redesign in the spirit of liberal arts, aiming to introduce interdisciplinary core courses and distribution requirements throughout its bachelor's degrees. The first core course in sustainability was created in 2008. After years of financial insecurity, UCG merged with Uppsala University in 2013, offering a Swedish-taught first year programme in the liberal arts under the name Campus Gotland.

<sup>116</sup> Borgert is an author of the following LE-relevant publications:(Borgert, 2008, 2013; Lundström et al., 2013).

<sup>117</sup> UCG (Högskolan på Gotland) sometimes translated as Gotland University.

#### 4.6.1. THEORY

##### Conceptual understanding

When Borgert visited Trinity College in 2000, he spoke with a sophomore student who was about to consider what specialisation to pursue only after two years of studies:

I fell in love with the idea that the higher education should prepare you, not for your first job, but for the rest of your life.

For Borgert, liberal education offered a way of broadening student perspectives so that they were 'able to cope with uncertain future' and change careers over time. It was a long-term career preparation combined with personal growth as a human being that Borgert found to be 'the hook' of liberal education. This understanding made Borgert distinguish between the traditional, humanistic 'liberal arts' education and what he called a 'liberal education' that produced 'an eclectic':

The combination of a specialisation and the broader perspective on our life, that is for me the main idea behind liberal education.

Liberal education meant also reflecting on one's faults and errors by tying the individual and an institution to their broader contexts. Borgert saw universities as institutions 'in and for the society', therefore they should not use the pursuit of academic freedom as a way to cover up their self-interest. Liberal education extended this vocation to each student.

The liberal for me is not doing what I like to do regardless of what the environment is, but to reflect upon things and test borders.

The UCG motto was 'hela studenten, hela vägen' – the whole student, all the way. Liberal education was supposed to be about more than coursework, both during and after the university years, and it should be seen as a preparation for the final job as much as for the first one. Borgert referred to the 'Head, Heart, and Hand' motto of MIT – education in and through intellect, moral sense, and practice. The strategies of implementing such education included integrative pedagogy, personalised curricula, extracurricular activities, and student support. Ideally, students should feel closely linked to their universities, unlike in most places in Sweden.

It was a different idea of what higher education is.

### Preferred label

Borgert felt that the term 'liberal education' was not recognised outside academic circles in Sweden, as it was too often misunderstood as 'liberal arts' education, that is:

a kind of an education for children of rich people in the US, it is about reading [in an annoyed voice until the end of the sentence] classical texts and it has nothing to do with preparing students for society and the working life.

The Swedish Foundation for International Cooperation in Research and Higher Education (STINT) organised seminars and faculty exchanges to boost liberal education in Sweden.

Unfortunately, Borgert thought it followed the classical 'liberal arts' interpretation:

I am not happy with the liberal arts concept that only puts classical texts in the foreground. Instead I prefer to ask: 'What kind of competencies should an academic have in the future?'<sup>118</sup>

Borgert's idea was for each educated person to make a contribution to the world based on their values and ideas. Rather than attempt to introduce a new concept, Borgert organised with his colleagues at UCG to publish an English-Swedish dictionary of the most relevant terms of liberal education.

I chose to call it 'Liberal Education', a model inspired by Liberal Arts but not copying it. It was a concept that I found inspiring. When I heard it, I had been able to think about the experiences that I made when I took trips to US and met all those people.

Another term Borgert was keen to avoid was *Bildung* -- *Bildning* in Swedish. The latter signalled the freedom of teaching and the freedom of learning, coming from a Humboldtian university, but used as a leeway to avoid any social responsibility. 'Folkbildning', which did not have this connotation, would not be academic enough.

As a *Högskola*, or university college with limited degree granting powers, UCG was a regional institution. It served local economy and was a source of local pride. Borgert pushed for rebranding it from Campus Gotland to Campus Visby to frontload the connection to the city, since he hoped UCG would play a larger municipal role.

### External purpose

<sup>118</sup> A quote from Borgert's introduction to ELAI Research Group members on 3.04.2018.

Alongside the self-development of the student, liberal education offered a parallel growth as a professional and as a person.<sup>119</sup> Current students are set to switch careers and live in an uncertain future. For this they need lifelong learning and a more reflective engagement with the broader social world. Professors must conceptualise their task as more than academic reproduction:

The society runs universities here [in Sweden] and the society has the right to also get something back from the universities. You couldn't only sit for yourself and think about things.

Employability is seen as 'a bit of a dirty word' among Swedish professors, who treat it as either incompatible with academic freedom or as an externally policy imposed by the EU agenda. Borgert thought it should be positively reinterpreted: universities' role is after all to produce professionals for society, and they cannot really 'stand aside'. Fulfilling this role serves democracy and contributes to greater equality. In a liberal education paradigm, a public institution delivers a public benefit which is 'employability in the long run'.

#### Target group

It never crossed Borgert's mind to select students for a liberal arts institution, but at the same time not all students might find it attractive. From his perspective, a clear academic ambition was one self-excluding factor – but he did not make a similar observation regarding a crystallised vocational preference.

Borgert criticised the current Uppsala-Visby programme for potentially scaring away many students as it only offers majors in the liberal arts fields. He would love to see more modern subjects that might attract a broader pool of candidates to a liberal arts institution.

#### Model alumni

Since liberal education fosters independent thinking, it does not mould students into one shape. Still, Borgert had certain expectations:

All liberal arts (*sic!*) students should have a drive to contribute in the world.

Liberal education should on the one hand instil certain values and ideals, but at the same time also a healthy distrust towards big concepts. Only some alumni might choose the path of 'stepping aside into the academic world', becoming what Borgert called 'critical thinkers'. But

<sup>119</sup> In Swedish, a person who is educated (*utbildad*) and the person who grew as a human being (*bildad*), are noted by two different words coming from the concept of *bildning*. German and Danish maintain similar distinction.

every student should, as a result of their liberal education, become a 'reflective professional' who would follow three callings:<sup>120</sup> to never stop reflecting upon things, to have the broader perspective on life, and to continuously engage with the world. Some of those reflective professionals might be the culturally aware 'engineers of tomorrow'. What matters most, however, was not who exactly they become, but that they 'get out in a society and do some work that is interesting'.

#### **4.6.2. PRACTICE**

##### Curriculum

First discussions about a liberal arts component at UCG explored a range of possible options: from a single 'broadening' course to adding 'broad perspectives' in all existing courses. Borgert wanted to phase in the eventual reforms, knowing how difficult a wholesale change might be:

You can discuss for centuries what a curriculum for a programme should be (laughter).

Between 2006 and 2008 UCG started drafting the reform plan with an ambition to eventually introduce a full liberal arts curriculum model consisting of specialist, broadening, and elective courses in each of the existing study programmes. The common broadening courses were to be 'intellectually and academically, as far as possible from the major', mirroring what Borgert had observed at the University of Hartford.

The first such course in sustainable development was introduced in 2009, immediately after Borgert's retirement. The choice was dictated by the importance of the issue as well as UCG location and mission. Next steps were supposed to be more of a 'trial and error' situation than a result of a big academic master plan. After the merger with Uppsala, UCG now offers a mix of skills-related courses and electives together making up half the curriculum of the first year. Borgert said it is definitely 'not what I dreamt of'.

##### Pedagogy

Borgert believes in a 'reflective conversation',<sup>121</sup> one based on equality and profound respect. In a reflective conversation people should not say 'Well, you are wrong', as they do in academic seminars, but rather they should try to pool their insights together:

<sup>120</sup> Borgert might have been referring to the 'reflective practitioner' from the title of a Donald A. Schön book (1982).

<sup>121</sup> A term used in Gareth Morgan's organisational theory (1983).

One person starts the discussion and another person says »when you were saying this I came to think about another thing«. That's for me a reflective conversation.

In liberal education, the ultimate role of a teacher is to 'stir the kids up',<sup>122</sup> make them doubt what they think they know, reflect on themselves and others, and be ready to change their perspectives. The ability and a habit to question others can create also a willingness to contribute. But a degree of openness is required from the teachers, too:

If you're stirring up other people you must be prepared to be stirred up yourself as well.

Borgert 'always liked to be a teacher', but found it challenging to return to the classroom now that the students can much more easily challenge the teacher by looking up information on the Internet:

I wouldn't say that a student shouldn't do that, but it's another world. It could be a kind of a reflective conversation. I've grown up with the lecture, I like lectures, but if higher education would be only lectures, I think that wouldn't be enough.

Borgert was sceptical about online learning until he saw his colleagues from archaeology and other humanities disciplines at UCG. They have shown him a qualitative improvement over their business school counterparts Borgert had seen before. After that, Borgert took an online jazz arranging course at Berklee College of Music. Ever since he saw online learning as really helpful, especially for upper level students, not just in overcoming geographical limitations but also in providing a different social dynamic:

Everybody is allowed to talk; it is harder to interrupt people. You have to ask for your turn. There could be a more democratic seminar online because we have to follow the rules to talk to each other.

At the same time, Borgert never taught a full course at UCG, and after that he taught courses on organisational theory and scientific methods at Dalarna University.

### Community

Borgert tried to orient Dalarna on liberal education, but was not successful. For one, its professional programmes had strong identities and were split between two different cities -

<sup>122</sup> Borgert referenced Richard Rorty's 'The Humanistic Intellectual: Eleven Theses' from 1989, later published in (Rorty, 1999).

'two different worlds', really. Gotland appealed to Borgert as an opportunity to create a mission-driven, internally coherent organization nested in its surrounding community:

UCG is most alike a Liberal Arts college in the whole Sweden. It's a wonderful environment, it's rather small, it's a very familiar culture, contacts between teachers and students are very positive and engaging. I immediately thought that here is the opportunity to create something like liberal education model.

UCG reminded Borgert of American liberal arts colleges he visited. Early in his tenure, Borgert created common spaces at UCG, bring together people from different programmes. By the time he was leaving, some faculty were even working in this space, now called Student Centre. A residential model was out of the question as too unusual for a Swedish university. The main reason was that pre-arranging university accommodation seemed an alien idea neither institutions nor students would want. This was one of the reasons that Borgert saw 'college' as untranslatable.

#### **4.6.3. BACKGROUND**

##### Personal motivation

A first-generation student, Borgert benefitted from the welfare state provision for higher education and then witnessed it being dismantled by the new public management reforms of the 1980s. The underlying market logic pitched access against breadth: more people could study, but all studied less than their predecessors. The array of courses grew from about a hundred in 1977 to about 3.000 in 2008, making any rational choice of a study programme impossible:

It's intellectually, and in other ways, more narrow kind of education than in the late '70s.

Throughout his career, Borgert worked in a range of industries and in various parts of the country. He returned to the university when he grew uneasy of the theoretical base for his consulting business. Borgert obtained his PhD at 49, only to have his grant application rejected. An attempt to excel at both teaching and research while at a small university college fell flat; realising the odds was 'a hard experience'.

In 1995 Borgert moved to a department manager position at the County Council of Stockholm, doing research on health economics. From there, things moved in a quick and surprising manner: Dalarna's Rector asked him to become his deputy in 1997, but soon after had to resign due to ill health, and Borgert found himself 'thrown into the role of a Rector' himself. As

his Dalarna term was nearly finished, Borgert sat on the plane next to the outgoing Rector of UCG, and a few months later was appointed her successor. At UCG, he 'immediately felt' that he could make a difference: there were no professional programmes nor engineering in the structure, but instead a small-scale, flexible institution spanning some unorthodox departments. This was a fairly unusual career path:

It seems that, at several times in my life, I have reached a point when I have to stop and reflect upon what I am doing. My strategy seems to have been to get a new job and/or to get inspiration and knowledge from other academic perspectives than those I had known/used before. Today I can look upon this as a driving force leading me to dig deeper into liberal education.

### American connections

In 2000, during the times of his failed attempt to create a 'college of integrated sciences' at Dalarna, Borgert and other Swedish rectors went on a study trip to Trinity College, Northeastern University, and to MIT.<sup>123</sup> Trinity president, Evan Dobbelle, explained to Borgert the co-dependency between the college and the society, pointing out of the window and telling him that 'walls have to be turned down sometimes'.

Two years later, Borgert visited Boston College and some other institutions in Boston area, observing a broad array of versatile institutions:

I saw that many of the students that went through the liberal arts colleges in the US managed very well in the working life. (...) Liberal arts colleges are regarded as good higher education institutions and prepare students for further studies or for going directly into the working life.

After a move to Gotland, Borgert attended a 2004 seminar in Stockholm as part of the STINT Programme for Excellence in Teaching. The programme was established in 1998 and offered scholarships for teaching sabbaticals at the US liberal arts colleges. Sheldon Rothblatt and Peter Rose have both given lectures at this seminar. Borgert also attended another seminar of the programme at Smith College in 2007.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>123</sup> The trip was financed by 'Högskoleverket' (National Agency for Higher Education) as part of a project on Bildung. The official name of the project, run by a governmental agency that no longer exists, was impossible to locate. It was conceived in 2001 by Sigbrit Franke, who was in charge of NAHE and produced a number of publications (in Swedish) throughout 2000s that are available online.

<sup>124</sup> Since 2011 the programme no longer focusses on the liberal arts institutions.

In his final year at UCG, Borgert took about 20 faculty and staff (then 10% of all employees) for a weekend trip to Smith and Amherst colleges. Showing colleagues what he had in mind ‘made a difference, actually’. Borgert wrote detailed reports from almost all such events.

### European connections

Scholars classified the Uppsala-Gotland merger as ‘friendly’,<sup>125</sup> but Borgert’s idea was lost in the process and he thought the approach it eventually adopted was ‘not quite what I aimed for’. He felt ‘a bit sad and a little guilty.’ Patrik Mehrens, who ran the programme from 2013-2015, had been very helpful for Gotland during Borgert’s tenure, but (perhaps naturally) their visions grew apart:

At that time neither of us had a clear view of what the liberal arts programme in Uppsala should look like. Anyway, we didn’t discuss that. If I had still been in office when the Uppsala programme started, we would perhaps have had different views of it.

Borgert briefly mentioned the Gothenburg liberal arts program as an example of a classical liberal arts degree.<sup>126</sup> The 2004 STINT seminar at Stockholm was the only significant opportunity for Borgert to meet liberal educators from Europe: Peter Rose gave a seminar paper on Adriaansens’ work, Laurent Boetsch and Thomas Nørgaard made a presentation on behalf of ECLA. Borgert remained in occasional contact with Nørgaard. Looking for European partners for UCG in the mid 2000s, Borgert only thought of the newly established ECOLAS. He thought that he probably did not look hard enough:

If I had been back in my rector chair now, I’d certainly try to learn more about what’s going on in Europe.

<sup>125</sup> Memorandum of understanding was signed in 2011 and the process was concluded in 2013; liberal education was considered a strength of Gotland which the future arrangement was supposed to retain (Karlsson and Geschwind, 2016).

<sup>126</sup> Interestingly, Borgert did not mention Jönköping International Business School that offered a course: ‘Core curriculum – en bildningsresa [Core curriculum – an educational journey]’. Introduced by Leif Alsheimer in 1997, the reading list consisted of 120 works of literature over eight semesters and was compulsory for all sixty students in the commercial law programme but borne no credit. This ‘liberal studies initiative’ (Agélii, 2003, p. 27) was considered a tool for personal development of the students; see also (Alsheimer, 2004). Alsheimer was a visiting professor at Wellesley College in 2001 on a STINT scholarship. Alsheimer died in 2010; the School no longer teaches commercial law and the course seems discontinued.

The evaluation report of the programme mentioned 1980s governmental reports on the possibility of liberal studies in Sweden that were inconclusive; liberal studies were a ‘taboo subject’ in Swedish higher education policy as they were declared inconsistent with the ‘social justice ideology’ and ‘ideology of social functionalism and social technocracy’, respectively (Agélii, 2003, pp. 17–18).



#### 4.7. THOMAS NØRGAARD. EUROPEAN COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS, GERMANY

##### Bio

Thomas Nørgaard (\*1972) studied philosophy at Århus, St. Andrews, Keele, and Tübingen. In 2002, he defended a PhD on compassion at Oxford and became a tutor at European College of Liberal Arts (ECLA) in Berlin. One year later, ECLA's administrators unexpectedly left their positions; Nørgaard and a fellow tutor, Peter Hajnal, became joint programme directors; in 2007 they became co-deans and eventually introduced a value studies BA curriculum in 2009.

After a new ECLA leadership was appointed in 2012, Nørgaard went on a sabbatical to the University of Warsaw and NYU. In 2014 he was hired by the University in Winchester, where he created the Institute for Value Studies, and is now Director of Liberal Education.<sup>127</sup>

##### Institutional profiles

ECLA was created by Stefan Gutzeit, Olaf Amblank, and Anne Sliwka in 1999; its international summer school on European philosophy, social theory, and literature was an early success.<sup>128</sup>

In 2002, The Endeavor Foundation assumed ownership of ECLA and provided funding for a full-year course (Academic Year), and an optional second year (Project Year). ECLA moved to its current location in the suburb of Pankow. The four-year bachelor's programme in value studies started in 2009 on a fully residential basis with all classes taught in English.<sup>129</sup> In those years ECLA had around 40 students throughout the year, and another 40 during the summer school; the institution was need-blind. Many students came from Central and Eastern Europe, and notably almost none from Germany.

In November 2011, ECLA was transferred to Bard College (NY). After changes in the curriculum, organisation, and policies, ECLA was renamed Bard College Berlin (BCB) in 2013.<sup>130</sup>

The Institute for Value Studies (IVS, 2015-) at the University of Winchester in 2015 offers a value studies modules which students from across the university can take as electives. IVS also organised study circles, movie screenings, public debates, and research on liberal education.

<sup>127</sup> Nørgaard is an author of the following LE-relevant publications: (Nørgaard, 2013, 2016; Nørgaard and Hajnal, 2014).

<sup>128</sup> In the first years, Jens Reich, Hans Gutbrot, Jan Werner Müller and Erika Kiss occupied various leadership positions.

<sup>129</sup> Starting with a double cohort. B1 in German was a requirement.

<sup>130</sup> US course credits were first awarded by Bard, later by Bennington College, and from 2011 again by Bard. In 2009, ECLA held a preliminary visit on the way to its own US accreditation but decided to pursue a German accreditation first. Berlin's Senate recognised ECLA's BA in value studies but the process was abandoned by the new administration. BCB now offers two other degrees accredited in both Germany and the US (through Bard). Post-merger changes are discussed in (Kontowski and Kretz, 2017).

#### 4.7.1. THEORY

##### Conceptual understanding

ECLA attracted newly-minted PhDs from both sides of the Atlantic who were interested in the dialogue on the fundamentals of academic life: education research, the nature of human inquiry. Sharing the opposition to the mainstream ways of academia, ECLA fellows nevertheless had strong and divergent opinions on the preferable alternative.

Nørgaard came to ECLA seeing teaching primarily as a way of grappling with moral questions. He felt ethics was of importance to everybody, and not even an academic philosopher is 'THE expert who can claim to own the final answer to a question'. Attempts to solve moral conflicts constitute an important part of how humans live in the world.

Nørgaard believes liberal education to be an essentially contested concept: ongoing and competing elucidations constitute the meaning of the term. This is in line with Nørgaard's pluralist stance. While a single, universally compelling interpretation of liberal education is impossible, it does not mean liberal education can be all things to all people.

It only makes sense to use the notion of liberal education, if you take it seriously, if you try to think about what the word 'liberal' means when used to describe an education.

To my mind this means that you have to consider in what sense this education is for those who are free (in some sense), or makes you free (in some sense), or expresses your freedom (in some sense).

Nørgaard and Hajnal conceived value studies as a new elucidation of what liberal education can be today. It was conceived for them and for the situation of ECLA: the notion of value is central to ethics and art, where Nørgaard and Hajnal hail from academically, but is pervasive enough to construct a larger vision for liberal education institution around it. Value studies create a space for a transformative, collective exploration of the role of values in our lives; practically, it means 'holding onto questions' and dealing with them in a personal manner.

Since 'ideas do something to you, actually', humans tend to learn about values in a deeply personal way. Disagreements about values, according to Plato's Socrates, make people friends and enemies. Value studies aim to engage people in the right kind of a conversation, not to provide a final resolution of a moral dilemma. If, 'for some reason, we've managed to choose a question or a text that doesn't seem to have a claim on us', value studies approach won't achieve what it is supposed to achieve. In the value studies approach, people holding many world-views and ideas for liberal education and life can all benefit from the exchanges it

provides. It can accommodate various pedagogical formats, types of students, faculty, topics, and broader aims of education.

Nørgaard defined value studies against three prominent contemporary understandings of liberal education: the great books, the elective system, and big problems curricula. Great books correctly viewed the classics as extremely valuable for the purpose of liberal education. The mistake was to call it 'the royal road', both ends and means of liberal education, and on that basis believe they are 'elevated above life of their author and consequently more interesting to spend time with than real people'.

In a great books programme, the curriculum revolves around great books,  
in a value studies programme it revolves around value questions.

Value studies aims to balance the content and the process, but in a way, pedagogy is more important than any specific reading list. Conversational pedagogy centres on the questions of value posed, as much as possible, in their real-life context. In most versions of a Value Studies curriculum, great books will probably be prominent, but would not define it – the context of the conversation will. Nørgaard gave the example of Karl Jaspers:

This man in 1946 is standing up in front of young students, 18 and 19, who see their country in utter ruin and says to them, 'Let's talk about German guilt'. Can you imagine? That's value studies.

Jaspers' example shows that, as a mode of critical intellectual engagement, value studies were practiced long before Nørgaard and Hajnal came up with the name and philosophical elucidation. Jaspers did not shy away from perhaps the most difficult topic in a post-war Germany and thus created the conditions for an inter-generational dialogue of the type that is unlikely to happen outside the university:

In a way, [at the university] one generation is trying to explain to the next what they have done and where they came from. And the new generation is trying to explain to the earlier one where they feel they are, and why in certain ways they are going to have to leave the previous generation behind. (...)

It's such an important institution in the modern democratic world. It is *de facto* the gate you have to pass through in order to secure a number of very high-profile jobs. It is an important institution to get right and the university would ultimately benefit from being solidly anchored in the tradition of liberal education.

Nørgaard recalled J.S. Mill's description of the university as a 'seat of liberal education'. But not the only one: it is entirely possible 'that the most important types of liberal education have to take place outside' the university setting.

### Preferred label

Initially Nørgaard and Hajnal thought of creating a 'problem-centred curriculum', but that name was imprecise and did not prioritise the questions. Around 2007, they adopted 'value studies' name finding values to be of shared interest and broader importance. Nørgaard was 'at peace' with the inherited 'ECLA' name, even though the institution had already gone through several leaderships and educational visions. For him, the value studies experiment at ECLA ended in 2011, when Bard upended the curriculum and abandoned the accreditation bid for value studies. He continues the development of value studies at IVS.

### External purpose

Value studies have no single external purpose; it is primarily a profound way to get a deeper understanding of ourselves and our place in the world. The related elevation of a certain type of a conversation as a tool of liberal education might remind of Michael Oakeshott's (2004) 'gift of an interval'.

But at the same time Nørgaard saw value studies as immensely relevant for culture and democracy, two domains constituted by the clashes between values-based positions. HA well-conceived education should prepare students to effectively operate in such areas For a pluralist democracy, educational reform and improvement 'is the profound thing to do': its political system relies on the appreciation of and ability to engage in dialogue as well as on tolerance of difference and disagreement.

The pursuit of moral progress is a cognitive project (...) that has to happen through some kind of education. Bildung is the formation of an individual, culture is the formation of a whole group, you need to work on both to make a real difference in the world. Otherwise it can end up being superficial; people might end up doing the right things but not for the right reasons. And it is not necessarily sustainable, it can collapse tomorrow, nothing solid is built in that way.

### Target group

Without almost any advertising, ECLA spread its call through the word of mouth. It attracted about 2 students per spot in the one-year programmes, and then 4 per spot in the BA degree.

All candidates wrote three essays as part of the admissions process. They were graded in a double-blind assessment.

ECLA used need-blind admission policy, and later determined the net tuition depending on the family income. Rich students did pay, poor students paid less or not at all, and The Endeavor Foundation balanced the budget. This means that between 2003 and 2011 ECLA was not reliant on tuition income.

Although in principle value studies are for everyone, ECLA curriculum required high intellectual input, an ability to read complex works, as well as the capacity to write academic texts. 'Not every student was prepared for what we were doing', and even though ECLA faculty were ready to provide 'a lot of support', the high pace of coursework required some selectivity. On the one hand, ECLA tried to avoid setting weaker students up for failure; on the other, given the generous financial support admission decisions were a matter of fairness. Most of the time ECLA did not have serious issues with the quality of accepted candidates:<sup>131</sup> if not all, most students had fairly clear and correct expectations of the demanding coursework at ECLA.

IVS is not selective, all students at Winchester have equal access to the Institute's modules. Most modules run at full capacity. The main difference is that they only complement whatever programme students there pursue, for better and for worse.

### Model alumni

Nørgaard believes that most ECLA alumni 'left with something of genuine value': the experience of living the life of ideas, the feeling of personal and moral importance of learning, Instead of reading 'from afar', ECLA alumni read up close, to the point of seeing how education changes who we are, often unpredictably. Nørgaard called it 'the drama of education', a reference to the opening scene of Plato's *Protagoras*.<sup>132</sup>

I would like students who experienced, felt, and appreciated this drama.  
Students who come out thinking, 'Shit, this is really serious business.  
(pauses) It's as dramatic as sex and love and all that stuff'. That's what I'd  
like.

### **4.7.2. PRACTICE**

<sup>131</sup> The former ECLA provost devoted a short chapter of his memoir to the issue of plagiarism and cultural differences with Eastern European students at ECLA, see (Shriver, 2017, pp. 115–122).

<sup>132</sup> Erika Kiss also wrote about this dialogue in connection to what liberal education is (Kiss, 2006).

## Curriculum

ECLA of 2002-2003 had no coherent, communicable vision of learning; Nørgaard recalled that the curriculum was 'made up as we went along'. From 2003 onward, Nørgaard and Hajnal started rethinking the curriculum in conversation with Julie Kidd, Endeavor's president, as with various consultants and US professors in the US. They agreed that the clear, distinctive vision for ECLA had to be rooted in its new curriculum.<sup>133</sup>

Value studies approach was meant as a counterpoint to four existing liberal education curricula. The dominant approach to the liberal arts in the US, namely a combination of general education courses and a disciplinary major, was of little use to their purposes, while an open curriculum as well as distribution requirements were lacking integration. Of integrative approaches, the great books curriculum had 'something too inherently conservative or static' about it, 'even though it has had its progressive defenders'. Great books proponents err by accepting a universalist continuity of the Greek existence until now ('Hutchins would say that the best education for an Ancient Greek is the same best education for a young person today') and ignoring the conversations that we can have today. The contemporary challenges approach, on the other hand, was 'slightly shallow' with a 'tendency not to dig deep enough', and did not appeal to the student personally.

From the great books approach, Nørgaard wanted to retain the fact that a fundamental pedagogical agreement about the means or method coexisted with a radically open-ended approach to the ends of education. With this transplant, value studies could avoid being idiosyncratic or dependent on a charismatic leader. People who otherwise disagree on many counts could collaborate in one educational institution:

Instead of being tilted in one political or cultural direction, value studies would actually facilitate a discussion between progressives and conservatives, people from theory and people from practice, people from different disciplines. Ultimately it was meant to be for us a curriculum that was expressive of an ideal of conversation - that we would like to uphold in our own conversation.

Core courses at ECLA were supplemented by three 'directions' offered instead of disciplinary majors: Art and Aesthetics, Literature and Rhetoric, as well as Ethics and Politics. Electives constituted half of the curriculum; all third years spend a year at another university, typically

<sup>133</sup> A preliminary accreditation report also noted the 'striking clarity of its educational model and approach', but it attributed it more mechanically to single major and unified pedagogy (Brittingham, 2009).

abroad; Nørgaard and Hajnal individually arranged their placements to maximise the integration.

The value studies curriculum took about four years to conceive and once the final idea emerged, not everyone at ECLA was happy about it:

I remember one conversation when I was emphatically saying that value studies was an alternative to the great books programme and I remember this person in a meeting hammering his fist [pounding the table repeatedly], shouting 'but this is a great books programme!'

And I said, 'well, actually it is not'. (...)

There was resistance like this in some corners. This guy left.

Future expansion plans would see ECLA adding new courses on the borders with economics and biology. The value studies curriculum was however abandoned by Bard (as the new owner) before the first cohort has graduated. For Nørgaard, this was the end of ECLA:

A curriculum is the incarnation of an institution's mission. When you change the curriculum in this wholesale manner, you change the mission and the identity of the institution.

### Pedagogy

The 'shared ideal' of a conversation distinguishes a value studies and it is only possible when the topic 'has a real claim on us'.

In the Value Studies classroom, we believe in the value of holding on to the fundamental questions about values and then letting everything revolve around that. (...) A value question is partly defined as a question that you are inclined to take personally. If you don't, it's probably not a value question.

A value studies seminar engages with the 'wise and bright people who thought about these things before us' but wants the conversation to lead to the places where the books on its own are unlikely to take us. This is why Nørgaard said 'I would like to have the person and the books but if I really had to choose, I will tend to be on the side of the living voice'. Practically, this might include asking students probing questions until they can explain what is relevant for them in this particular text and why.

If you find yourself discussing something that you think might actually touch your joy, or your pride, or your anger -- Then we're getting somewhere.

Value studies pedagogy offers a solution for the 'great cultural disaster of youngsters bored by education'. A conversation 'could do wonders', on a pedagogical and personal level, but ideas are also dangerous. 'You sit down, and you start reading, and something is happening from page one.' The outcome is unpredictable. It might be painful. But it might be exhilarating.

Every week, ECLA students had individual tutorials to discuss their essays. All professors and all 40 students attended the biweekly lectures in each course. Seminar groups were run by a rotating roster of faculty to maximise diversity. The second-year programme had an integrated cohort of 10-12 students.

In the spring, all first-year students went to Florence to experience what they were learning about in core courses throughout the year. A dedicated building on campus served as a space for students' art installations: the whole ECLA community attended the openings.

Many courses at ECLA invited researchers, politicians, activists, practitioners as guest lecturers. At IVS this practice produced a mixed result. While Nørgaard introduced guests to the idea of value studies, some did not understand or maybe agree. Some students noted about those events 'it's as if they don't know what we're doing', and Nørgaard thought it might not be all bad:

That's a weird situation but that happens. (...) Still, it helps highlight the good that we do elsewhere.

### Community

ECLA was a small scale, independent, residential college. Between 40-50 students across two one-year programmes were taught by 7-10 faculty members. Nørgaard and Hajnal hired people bearing in mind their pedagogical dedication and accessibility to students outside classroom.

Each academic year began with a retreat during which all faculty discussed the principles of liberal education in general and value studies in particular. Nørgaard prepared a reader with writings on liberal education that was distributed to all faculty and students. ECLA had a specific culture of common learning, encompassing but not erasing differences in personal teaching styles.

I don't think it's impossible to create a community of people who over time establish a culture where students can reliably assume that there's a certain way of working together in the classroom. It takes a little bit of time to get everyone on the same page. And, of course, every community devoted to

what we call value studies may be doing it slightly differently, but I think that there is a recognisable mode of working together in this manner. (...) If a student from those days at ECLA would come here [to Winchester] and sit in the classroom and see a seminar here that would work in the right way, they would say, 'Yes. This is Value Studies'.

Even as after 2009 ECLA had more students, the faculty-student ratio was still lower than in the Ivy League. Faculty members, not extensively engaged in research and dissemination, were able to spend much time on campus talking to students.

We were young people in our 30s and yes, we wanted to do research, but we were actually around. We spent our days out there (...) we would eat together in the cafeteria every day. Everyone had free lunch in the cafeteria, including the teachers, and there was no high table like at Oxford. We'd actually sit with the students and very often we would talk, we would continue a conversation from the seminar over lunch. (...) There were events all the time, there were parties... and the staff also came along to the parties. We would discuss God and life - while drinking wine.

The office-classroom distinction was also abolished, on the idea of Julie Kidd:

It may sound like a small thing, but all ECLA faculty taught in their offices. Every office was set up with a seminar table and space for a seminar, so students would come to your office, [different tone until the end of the sentence] and in a way, they would feel that, yes, of course, it's your office but it's also in that manner, their space.

It actually meant that students felt that they could come and knock on your door, and they did in a way that I haven't seen in any other institution. There was a sense here that staff was available in a way that's just uncommon.

Those extraordinary features of ECLA were also expensive, and therefore, not financially sustainable in the long run. But for Nørgaard it was important that students 'felt the immediate difference', even if they could not describe it in sophisticated terms:

Our discussions were different, the relation to each student and teacher was different, the focus was different (...).

Of course, students who came in directly from high school may not have understood, but their friends who had been around and were a few years older would tell them: 'No trust me, this is different'. You may go to

Humboldt [Universität] or Freie [Universität] and next year you will see it has been different.

There was no doubt, (...) I've never heard a student saying that you're just doing the same thing, I don't think that ever happened.

ECLA was not seriously tied to Berlin; the city was attractive for prospective students, and cultural attractions that enhanced course experience. But value studies could just as easily be offered in many other places.

#### **4.7.3. BACKGROUND**

##### Personal motivation

Nørgaard started considering an academic position only mid-way through his DPhil. He applied to ECLA job as he was attracted by a diverse intellectual community that would allow him to 'work closely with people from other disciplines'. Encouraged by his supervisors, Nørgaard accepted the position and finished his doctoral studies early. Since he 'became a little bit of a generalist over time', he found ECLA much to his liking. During that first year he read many classical literary works that he missed before:

At the time I thought 'what I am doing here, to be completely honest, is I am being paid to pursue the liberal education that I never had.

Prominent academic philosophers had a habit of taking their pet theories and 'half-heartedly applying them into ethics'; Nørgaard found out quickly that Hajnal felt the same about art. ECLA offered both a chance to consider issues from many perspectives instead of transplanting ready-made theories. Nørgaard realised that serious thinking in ethics and broad culture were not contradictory: he became better at the former through reading much of the latter.

During the summer of 2003, Nørgaard was writing in Sarajevo when Endeavor called to offer him and Hajnal full responsibility for the curriculum. Nørgaard had come to ECLA for a teacher's job and the very offer was surprising, but he accepted administrative duties.

I wanted to write back then, but when forced to choose between institution-building and writing I did not doubt what I most wanted to do.

After leaving ECLA, Nørgaard was initially open to non-academic jobs as well as long as he could 'do the institution building of the kind I believe in'.

What I am interested in life, I could do in a completely different domain. (...)  
You could say that I care about democratic institutions, that would be one way to describe my underpinning interest.

### American connections

When The Endeavor Foundation got more involved in 2003, 'that was the beginning of a new ECLA'. Nørgaard, Hajnal, and Julie Kidd worked closely together and this was 'why it took off really'. They held long phone conversations, and especially annual retreats at Kidd's house in upstate New York where they 'would camp out for a week (...) talking from early morning to late evening', sometimes joined by other people as well. Kidd was essential for ECLA.

She was always, well in a way an outsider, but at the same time totally an insider. And so ECLA was also created in conversation with her. (...) When you sit down with Julie to discuss something practical, you typically end up discussing books, and theatre, and ballet, and business... All sorts of things. And at the same time, you will actually get the work done. It was a rich and delightful way of working.

Endeavor's patience with ECLA's development gave Nørgaard a period of 'fantastic education', during which he was able to visit many US liberal arts institutions, talking to administrators, students, and teachers but also observing their classrooms.

Nørgaard: The Foundation frequently sponsored study trips for us. We were typically in the US twice a year and the Foundation put us in touch with lots of interesting people. I felt that I could talk to anybody I wanted to. Julie would make a phone call (laughter) and then this person would see us. We, two nobodies, got to walk into to Al Bloom's office (laughter), and talk to him for an hour. (...)

DK: It seems that you were born under a lucky star.

Nørgaard: Yes, I felt very strongly from early on that this is incredible.

When Nørgaard and Hajnal were about to assume full responsibility for ECLA in 2007, they got more involved in discussions with Endeavor's consultants. Once they finally pitched their idea, Endeavor was 'fully supportive and never looked back'. Before being officially promoted to co-deans and managing directors – effectively responsible for all ECLA operations – they also attended a seminar for new college presidents at Harvard. But for all his knowledge of the US liberal arts, Nørgaard never considered working there. 'I am inspired by this book [points to the 'Perpetual Dream'], but I want to work in and for Europe'.

that is exactly what we need in Europe for the 21st century, a much more diverse, vibrant experimental scene - like the one the US had in the 20th.

### European connections

When he joined ECLA, Nørgaard did not know about any similar programmes in Europe, and for most of his years there he remained focussed on the US liberal arts scene. Endeavor's connection brought Axer and Abrahám to ECLA around 2002-3 for some talks, but Nørgaard was more interested in them as individuals than their institutions. Until the late 2000s, he did not find any examples of integrated curricula in Europe of the kind he was interested in.

But slowly, Nørgaard started 'waking up to Europe'. After a STINT conference at Stockholm Nørgaard thought that 'there were people in Sweden that I felt were serious'. An Amsterdam University College delegation visited ECLA around 2008, and ECOLAS was always on Nørgaard's radar because of ECLA's former president role there. Nørgaard and Hajnal visited Kolegium Artes Liberales and MISH at Warsaw once or twice and after leaving ECLA, Nørgaard taught as a visiting professor there for a semester.

As a private college in a country dominated by public universities, ECLA first established connections with other privates like Witten-Herdecke University and later Zeppelin University. Bucerius Law School came closest to the real cooperation with ECLA:

They had an interest in liberal education, and Marcus Baumann, who was the first dean of Bucerius Law School, and eventually ran Die Zeit foundation, came to visit and this was a beginning of a cooperation. They actually wanted us to help develop their liberal arts programme.

It fell through in the end, for various reasons, but we did go to Bucerius few times, and they came to us, and we had at least two or three meetings with Marcus and others. (...) there was a connection back then, and we thought that was interesting, a law school that wanted a liberal arts element, especially that it was when we articulated value studies, and the idea to take value studies to a law school was very interesting, that made sense to us. Weirdly, out of all other institutions in Germany, Bucerius Law School seemed the most interesting for us.

Nørgaard also visited Leuphana towards the end of his tenure at ECLA, but eventually it was not consequential.

There were some people who we found interesting and they really appreciated what we were doing. There was a great books person there,

[Karin Beck] who came out of Columbia, and we had some good conversations with her before she moved somewhere else.

After leaving ECLA, Nørgaard did a joint session with the founding director of University College Freiburg, Nicholas Eschenbruch,<sup>134</sup> and visited University College Maastricht a few times to give plenary lectures. Asked if he would recommend any of the other programmes, Nørgaard mentioned MLA:

Winchester is worth considering for some students at least -- otherwise obviously I wouldn't teach here if I didn't believe in this. So, I think it's a bit idiosyncratic what they're doing here, but it's a very serious project, and I do think it's valuable. I do think that students here are quite enthusiastic for a good reason.

But there were also some forms of liberal education that Nørgaard saw as unhelpful, if not worse, because they are not 'serious enough', and he did not spare his criticism:

It's as if in some circles the notion of liberal arts -- it just sounds good. Try asking their leadership what the liberal arts is, and they have no answer, all they say is that's what they are doing in America. (...)

Educationally speaking, they may randomly be doing a few good things here and there, but can also do as much harm as good, right?

We would probably be better off if they would just close. I am not going to cry when that happens. We have no need for thoughtless educators.

<sup>134</sup> 'Rethinking Liberal Learning' at Copenhagen Business School, 10 December 2014.



#### 4.8. NIGEL TUBBS. MODERN LIBERAL ARTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER, UK

##### Bio

Nigel Tubbs (\*1961) taught Integrated Humanities at UK comprehensive schools. He received a Master's in Sociological Studies at Sussex University, and a PhD in Hegelian philosophy at the University of Warwick in 1992.

Between 1992 and 2004 Tubbs was a programme director of an undergraduate Education Studies degree at King Alfred's College in Winchester. The college, founded as a teacher training institution in 1840, became a university in 2005. While writing *History of Western Philosophy* (2009), Tubbs became interested in the concept of liberal arts and introduced a Modern Liberal Arts degree in 2010.

Tubbs described the philosophical foundations of the degree in *Philosophy and Modern Liberal Arts Education: Freedom is to Learn* (2015). He also edited a series of liberal arts-related entries for the *Encyclopaedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2017) and co-edited an issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* (2018) with student submissions from LESC 2016 conference.<sup>135</sup> With the US-based Association of Core Texts and Courses, Tubbs co-organised the second European Liberal Arts Conference in Winchester (2018).<sup>136</sup>

##### Institutional profile

Modern Liberal Arts (MLA) is organised around ancient and modern ways of exploring first principles of truth, freedom, and nature. In this small BA course, students take most classes as a common cohort. In 2015 the Programme was renamed BA Modern Liberal Arts (Philosophy) and in 2017 BA Liberal Arts; it can be taken as a separate degree or in combination with Drama, English, Sociology and History. A one-year MA is also offered based on independent study and supervisions. In 2015 Tubbs became the programme leader of the MA programme. The BA is led by Rebecca Howes.

<sup>135</sup> Vol. 50, no. 11, October 2018, consists of an introduction (Tubbs and Tonda Dirksen, 2018), submissions from MLA students (Smith, 2018; Tidbury, 2018), and contributions from students from other ELEs (Bergland, 2018; Claus et al., 2018; Cooper, 2018; Haberberger, 2018; Lundbye Cone, 2018).

<sup>136</sup> Tubbs is an author of the following LE-relevant publications: (Carter and Tubbs, 2017; Tubbs, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018).

#### 4.8.1. THEORY

##### Conceptual understanding

Tubbs thought about Education Studies as a field of study (or 'a discipline'), an attempt 'to retrieve education in its own right'. This philosophy of education was inspired in part by the re-reading of Hegel found in the work of Gillian Rose.<sup>137</sup> By the mid-2000s Tubbs' interests spread to the question of first principles of truth, nature, and freedom in the Western tradition.

The question of first principles falls through the hole in the middle, nobody wants it, [it] doesn't belong to any particular academic discipline.

From the perspective of the existing academic disciplines, questions concerning first principles are too far-ranging, unanswerable by specialised methods of inquiry, and therefore ultimately uninteresting. This applies to academic philosophy too and is strengthened by a set curriculum and a professionalised identity. But the old liberal arts approach used to be structured around them:

Where did first principles vanish to?

Tubbs reinterpreted the fundamental antagonism of philosophers and orators in the liberal arts tradition as 'a wonderful tear' between discipline and freedom:

It was right there from the beginning [in Ancient Greece], the rhetoricians thought they had freedom, the philosophers thought they had the discipline of dialectical metaphysical thinking.

American liberal arts ultimately followed the rhetorical path, 'seen as creative and liberal whereas the philosophy paths were seen as scholastic, Aristotelian, and dogmatic'. Tubbs wanted to reclaim the philosophical tradition of the liberal arts. The new Vice Chancellor of Winchester, Joy Carter, reacted enthusiastically to the idea of a degree dealing 'build around it'. The 'liberal artsy kind of ethos' might have been seen by Carter as a tool for reemphasising Winchester's Anglican foundation and the reflection on values. She liked the breadth and the questions-based approach of the American liberal arts but wanted students to reflect more on their own values in the world.

MLA focussed on tension of discipline and freedom that neither the ancient nor the modern life can escape:

<sup>137</sup> Gillian Rose (1947 – 1995) was a British scholar who worked in the fields of philosophy and sociology. Notable facets of this social philosopher's work include criticism of neo-Kantianism and post-modernism, along with a forceful defence of Hegel's speculative thought. Rose supervised the doctoral work by Tubbs.

You're told what to do and you don't want to be told what to do, it's almost as simple as that. It's any experience of power and powerlessness, any experience of master or slave, it's ubiquitous.

You don't have to spend long in an open day talking about discipline and freedom, perhaps giving an example, before the visitors are right with you. They know they've been told to do stuff and they know they've wanted to do something else; this can be the free choice and the discipline of an institution or a tutor or a workplace or a family or wherever they clash.

Actually, you don't have to do any work to find it, it's the modern experience.

To a certain extent MLA is still a classical liberal arts degree, since it is 'broadly centred on the question of first principles and the history of intellectual expeditions to find them'. However, since modernity brought in fundamentally different epistemology, metaphysics, politics and logic than those of the ancient times, there is now a need for 'modern' liberal arts. In modernity, truth is challenged by relativism, freedom is incompatible with slavery, and rationality can no longer assume the underlying harmony of the world. As a degree structured around those tensions, MLA offers 'education taken seriously as its own end' and a 'degree in its own right'.<sup>138</sup>

Tubbs: We are not a general education, not at all. (...) If we are doing first principles, how [much] deep[er] is anybody else going than that? (...) Finding meaning in life is a very specific thing. We're not giving people the bag of spanners and telling them to go out and find a bolt where they can screw.

Kontowski: Would you say you're offering a BA in the meaning of life?

Tubbs: A BA in the role that questions can play in giving meaning to one's life.

### Preferred label

Tubbs thought 'Liberal Arts' name will signal the continuity: for reclaiming the study of the first principles, retaining the original term made perfect sense.<sup>139</sup> Even though he admitted that

<sup>138</sup> A more detailed argument for the modern liberal arts was recently summarised in (Howes, 2017).

<sup>139</sup> Cf. 'St. John's College is a genuine school of the liberal arts (as opposed to the rather indefinite liberal education" offered by most other colleges)' (Brann, 1975, p. 10).

'we play a bit fast and loose with translation here', Tubbs thought the term still has communicative value:

We try to explain to students that the two terms 'liberal' [and] 'arts' offer us a wonderful contradiction that can be a very heart of an experience of a degree in higher education.

If 'liberal' is freedom, and 'arts' is broadly speaking the discipline of that art, then freedom and discipline are coming together.

That's a wonderful introduction to the ancient and to the modern, and we hang on to that, not fiercely, but it does quite a nice job in giving them an early indication of why 'Liberal Arts'.

The name was to Carter's liking since it 'met with her values [and] aspirations' for the University as well as it matched the Anglican foundation. Tubbs also recalled early discussions with the registrar where they referred to the degree as 'BA Thinking'.

#### External purpose

As education in its own right and 'as its own subject', logically then MLA degree cannot have any external purpose. Tubbs challenged students that they let higher education speak in its own voice -- with all the contradictions:

Thinking about an MLA degree, one student wondered 'If it's got a promise at the end of it, am I corrupting it?'. That is a good question.

#### Target group

The only entry requirement for MLA is an interest in truth, nature, and freedom. The programme aims to attract students who ask questions and 'questions about questions' as a pathway towards first principles.

When students start talking about injustice, two, or three questions later, they realised their antagonism could all be linked to principles that they didn't even know they had.

Tubbs believes such questions to be of universal nature. They should not be delayed until higher education, and accordingly MLA faculty collaborate with schools as well:

The nearer down to the roots we get, the better. Even undergraduate experience might be too late, there's no reason why they [the first principles] shouldn't be [discussed] in schools.

The liberal arts of the past were complicit in sustaining injustices, a modern liberal arts degree aims to face them. In the highly stratified English higher education landscape, few students with elite aspirations would ever consider Winchester. This should not be seen as a problem:

The more people we can get from non-traditional university entrance the better, because these questions are for... everyone, not just for the next generation of civil servants and doctors.

As grades never simply reflect the merit of a candidate, MLA does not consider them in admissions. The challenging core texts of MLA, announced on the website and during the open days, might deter some candidates.<sup>140</sup> Tubbs had been assuring candidates that they have 'already rehearsed in their conversations many of the issues we are going to explore'. In this sense, everyone is ready – if they are really interested:

Let's look at the other way around. Who am I to say to somebody who's asked to come and read Plato, 'You can't. You can't come and read Plato, I'm sorry'.

MLA tutors might work with the students who might have otherwise not be admitted elsewhere.<sup>141</sup> But this problem can be overcome – and Tubbs praises those who embrace the difficulty:

A good student for me... [is the one who] struggles to understand everything we do.

### Model alumni

Tubbs did not offer any general model for an MLA graduate. As MLA is not a philosophy degree, there is no obvious future pathway for its graduates. Students approaching completion are advised by their tutors according to their individual interests.

Tubbs recalled that some MLA alumni protested when the required employability statement was put on the programme website:

<sup>140</sup> As a side note, Tubbs wondered if more people would have considered MLA a few years back before the tuition fees were introduced.

<sup>141</sup> MLA used to be able to offer admission to students who had two E grades at their A-levels.

When we go into some of our seminars and say things about employability, sometimes students say ‘We don't care. If we cared about employability we wouldn't have come on the programme, so don't do it. Go back to the course’.

Tubbs believed that if one came to MLA with the hope of increasing their employability, they would likely be frustrated. However, studying first principles can lead to a range of side effects, among them a sense of vocation or integrity. Why should any employer not want that from their employees?<sup>142</sup>

#### **4.8.2. PRACTICE**

##### Curriculum

MLA courses had been designed and redesigned to engage with different ways of reflecting upon nature, politics and metaphysics. MLA juxtaposes the modern and the ancient versions of engaging with those questions:

There's every reason to go and look at other versions of the same problems we're grappling with. That's aside from the question that it is all part of the same tradition obviously. Now, *logos* binds us all together. But it will be really arrogant to say we don't need to go back and look at the people who got it wrong, because thankfully the Enlightenment sorted all that out.

For Tubbs, the great books are part of the philosophical tradition - ‘How could they not be?’ – and therefore have a place in the MLA curriculum. As it happens, MLA courses cover at least six of the medieval liberal arts – arithmetic being the exception.

MLA sets its own learning outcomes and their progression and only after that maps them to the skills and competencies required by the existing standards. Tubbs did not see a difficulty with designing generic learning outcomes.<sup>143</sup> For all its unusual character, MLA had no fundamental problems with validation.

The master's degree in MLA uses the model of individual supervision first introduced by Tubbs in Education Studies degree. It is sustainable even with one student. MLA MA was primarily designed as a continuation of the BA in ‘the best possible conditions that we could create’.

<sup>142</sup> For a discussion of degree apprenticeships from the perspective of combining the vocational education, traditional university education, and liberal education, see (Carter and Tubbs, 2017).

<sup>143</sup> Tubbs gave the following example: ‘In Year Two a student will engage with a primary text and the outcome will be an understanding of that text’.

MA students were in charge of all the essays that they wrote and the dissertation. It enabled them to pursue their interests in a way that any set curriculum wouldn't.

### Pedagogy

In MLA, students do not have to prepare for the classes in advance:

We have a text in front of us, we sit around a table, we read through the text interrupting ourselves for clarification, conversation, questions... that's it.

We share the text; we share the experience of reading the text together for the first time. Usually we don't give out the text and ask people to read in advance. Read afterwards, but let's have the same experience... in the room to begin with.

I prefer that to the experience where everybody comes in and some have read it, and some haven't, some think they know about it, and some don't... because it is messy. That really does leave some people out in the cold.

This pedagogy can be seen 'even as a measure of equal opportunities' given the different social backgrounds and levels of academic preparation of MLA students. Asked why most courses prefer that students come prepared or not come at all, Tubbs elaborated on his vision of the teacher's role:

That's not how I see education. It's not there to be used as a stick to beat people. Part of the key to any successful education is that the tutor does have to motivate, I don't think there's anything wrong with that. (...) Part of my job is to want them to leave the room wanting to read the text more, that's my job.

MLA students take most courses in a common cohort with a handful of tutors. This helps create a shared culture of inquiry and a recognised style of interaction. The seminars are 'open enough' to follow almost all questions students might raise:

We're trying to begin with their questions of a text. But there's no introductory lecture, there's no theory beforehand, there's no necessarily set agenda as to what we're going to find in a book.

All assessment in MLA consists of essays: 'exams do not suit what we want our students to be able to do'. As usual for English universities, grades from the first year do not affect the final

grading structure. MLA students write about eight essays each year. A lesson carried from Education Studies is that students benefit from extensive practice:

Are they over-assessed? Possibly. Would assessing them less be better?

I don't think so.

### Community

MLA does not coordinate communal activities. Tubbs explained that students and faculty interact in all sort of contexts, but most contacts outside classes take place over email. One MLA student noted that emails had the discipline that blogs and social media do not. MLA tutors do not participate in social media groups created by each cohort of MLA students.

Tubbs rejected the thought that MLA could be offered online. 'You can't beat people in a room reading, thinking, talking in a good institutional setting.' He called online classes a bad solution to the real problem of financial accessibility of higher education in England.

### **4.8.3. BACKGROUND**

#### Personal motivation

As a high school teacher, Tubbs taught in the comprehensive education system. Created in the 1960s and 70s, it was a fundamentally inclusive approach to education, taking 'everybody, of all abilities (...) all in the same place, treated as a whole'. Tubbs wanted the universities to follow the same route.

For me, higher education can be comprehensive. I think we could have a right of access for every person in the country to spend three years at a University, if and when they choose, regardless of abilities.

In the 1990s and 2000s, Winchester had been steadily expanding from its teacher training base. The university first introduced combined honours, and later self-standing degrees. Education Studies, which Tubbs introduced and led during that time, was 'an important predecessor' of MLA.

We didn't teach the philosophy of education, or the sociology of education, or the politics of education because we weren't interested in that at all. All we were interested in was education. We tried to do it thematically, aligning it to a philosophical tradition, a social and political tradition but never using the methodologies or the perspectives of any one disciplinary approach.

For Tubbs, the philosophical interest in the work of education could be distilled from the institutional arrangement of schools and other institutions. This 'kernel' of educational philosophy later informed the creation of MLA.

### American connections

MLA was not modelled after any American practice. Tubbs was interested in the question of the first principles – and found out that existing liberal arts institutions do not really study them in any recognisable form:

I can't remember finding any website in North America or Europe which said, 'And we're doing the Trivium and the Quadrivium'.

What I did find (...) was that Liberal Arts in North America seemed to have just changed from whatever it was in the past or whatever its core was. Now it has become something completely different. I was quite shocked by that, I couldn't find, even in the religious colleges, a firm commitment to the question of first principles in the three key areas that this shaped the Western tradition... which was interesting.<sup>144</sup>

### European connections

When Tubbs was conceiving MLA in the late 2000s, England had no liberal arts degrees, Northern Ireland had one, and the only existing one in Scotland was closing. After Winchester started, UCL, King's, Birmingham, Exeter, and Durham started their own liberal arts degrees but those were considered high status institutions; Tubbs suspected that 'the types of students they're getting will reflect certain values and aspirations'. MLA was unique given its educational philosophy centred around a set understanding of the liberal arts.

If we're the only people doing first principles then by definition, I think everybody else is missing out by believing that Liberal Arts is not about metaphysics, physics and politics.

Before MLA started, Tubbs had not been looking into Europe. Reflecting on his negative experience with Education Studies, he was concerned by the attempts at standardisation

<sup>144</sup> Since 2015, Tubbs connected with the US-based Association of Core Texts and Courses, creating a biannual European Liberal Arts conference with them.

originating from some European organisations hoping to define what liberal arts education is or should be.

We would resist that as best we can. (...) any grandiose plans or some sort of imperialism across the continent to standardise Liberal Arts education. Under the guise of 'We must increase its status so that it's seen as equal to everybody else'.

Speaking about 'the liberal arts family', Tubbs was 'incredibly impressed' by the UCL Arts and Sciences degree. It 'might as well be more authentically a liberal arts programme' as it does not only focus on the humanities. Some other programs were notably less interesting:

When I went to a conference a couple years ago at King's College London, a colleague who was there from another English university more or less said the same thing.

'Our liberal arts courses are largely a timetabling approach. To enable the most possible choice for people to choose stuff'.

That's not my idea of liberal arts education.

#### 4.9. CORE FINDINGS

Interviews with the eight first leaders painted a rich landscape of ELE. Each vision spanned conceptual, institutional and individual components, addressed to a varying degree in wide-ranging interviews. Individual visions were also symbiotically related to both their immediate context and national policies as well as historical moments in which ELEs were conceived. Needless to say, the amount of details provided by the leaders and the complexity of comparing eight visions can feel overwhelming.

To facilitate comprehension, Table 7 summarises the main message of each leader. Setting aside background categories, it addresses the elements of individual vision that pertain to the five theoretical and three practical dimensions of ELE. Each cell contains a researchers' recapitulation of what the leader had to say regarding a particular topic. Table 7 can be read both horizontally and vertically: either to see all components of each leaders' vision, or to compare opinions of different leaders regarding the same aspect of ELE. The leaders appear in the same order as their sections in Chapter Four.

The texts in each cell can be seen as section summaries, an attempt at coding the content close to the analysed material. Summaries were composed by the researcher in a language close to each leaders' parlance, at times using keywords from the interviews.

The table was conceived at the same time as a mnemonic and an analytical tool. It illustrates the diversity in both opinion about and the way liberal arts education was conceptualised and addressed by each leader. But they leave open the question what those descriptions could possibly have in common.

Table 7 provides a bridge between the world of individual interviews in Chapter Four and the comprehensive analysis in Chapter Five.

Table 7. Summary of first leaders' opinions on the theory and practice of ELE

|                    | Theory  |  |   |  |  | Practice  |   |   |
|--------------------|---|--|---|--|--|---|---|---|
|                    | Preferred label   | Conceptual understanding   | External purpose  | Target group   | Model alumni   | Curriculum  | Pedagogy  | Community   |
| <b>Adriaensens</b> | Liberal arts (and sciences); university college   | 'The Dutch mix': multi-disciplinary, choice-based curriculum, offered in an Oxbridge-size college setting to assure diversity and responsibility | Superior undergraduate degree combining cognitive and socio-moral dimension of education            | All university entrants with interests not settled on one discipline             | Excellence as an effect of realising one's potential                           | US-inspired, academic skills-oriented, elective curriculum with distribution requirements among three branches of knowledge | Determined by small groups and teachers' autonomy                       | Diverse micropolis; a 'pressure cooker': residential college, international, interdisciplinary, |
| <b>Mikhailov</b>   | Labels are only artificial containers   | Education in the tradition of European humanities: difficult, genuine, new form of intellectual life   | Neither post-communist intellectual desert nor turbocapitalist utilitarianism                       | Disillusioned, seeking freedom and engagement                                    | Uncorrupted, exercising judgement, humane                                      | A holistic reflection on the human being  | Activating students and teachers, avoiding lectures and passivity       | Exiled, academic, alternative niche -- also distance programs                                   |
| <b>Axer</b>        | Interdisciplinary; later "liberal education" only in English                                    | 'Axer's formula': (disciplinary, generational) diversity and (nonconformist) teamwork equals (experimental) interdisciplinarity                  | Truly autonomous academic community; from catalyst to laboratory, from elite to egalitarian         | Misfits (first high achievers, later unorthodox interests)                       | Renaissance soul, disregarding departmental walls and external pressures       | Sandbox, continuous experimentation   | Collaborative learning through tutorials or student-faculty projects    | Trust-based, engaging, creative use of the university autonomy                                  |
| <b>Abraham</b>     | liberal arts, though it is 'a vague something' and a fluffy language                            | Seminar-based, intellectual engagement with texts and ideas  | Liberation from narrowmindedness, superficial criticality, and meaninglessness of everyday life     | All students ready to work regularly, regardless of preparation                  | Students who will be admitted to good graduate programs                        | Human culture, hidden under the curriculum nominally in political science   | Student-centred seminar   | Intellectual camaraderie, shared passion for learning   |
| <b>Koposov</b>     | Arts and Humanities, liberal arts, or politically liberal education (depending on the audience) | A broader paradigm for higher education, matching the expanded and diverse needs of a democratising country                                      | Counteracting the ideology of professionalism   | Students who realise that the dominant system does not work                      | Multi-dimensional, personalised growth   | A balanced curriculum of many disciplines and methodology, more student choice  | Increased expectations for independence, interactivity, and connections | Institutional culture of kindness   |
| <b>Borgert</b>     | Liberal education instead of liberal arts   | Education for personal fulfilment, societal engagement, and long-term employability  | Contributing to the world -- as citizens, academic, employees                                       | Everybody, as long as they are not disinterested eclectics or focussed academics | Reflective practitioners   | Interdisciplinary breadth and relevance   | 'Stirring the kids' through respectful dialogue                         | Space-based, locally-rooted, realistically limited  |
| <b>Norgaard</b>    | Value studies as a form of liberal education  | A friendly conversation about values that is personal, meaningful, and engaging.   | Supporting pluralist culture and democracy by individuals who understand disagreements about values | Those who want to link how they live their lives with the life of ideas          | People who have felt the drama of education                                    | Integrated immersion in conversations about values; topics are secondary to the method                                      | Intergenerational, not-just-academic, diversified conversation          | Intellectual relation, as holistic as conditions permit   |
| <b>Tubbs</b>       | Modern liberal arts, where modernity means no slaves nor truth.                                 | A study of first principles, or the ancient and modern tensions between freedom and discipline   | Education is its own end  | All who have questions about questions   | Lovers of difficulty, people of integrity, attentive to the voice of education | Not disciplinary, but neither generalist -- focussed on first principles  | Radically inclusive, aporetic seminar                                   | An exercise in intellectual discipline  |

## **CHAPTER FIVE. A COMMON VISION FOR EUROPEAN LIBERAL EDUCATION? ANALYSING THE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

Interview data, summarised in section 4.9., indicate a broad variation of understandings of ELE among the first leaders. Table 7 shows more coherence within each individual vision (row) than within each analytical category (column). Coherent individual visions seem to create an incoherent collective phenomenon. To evaluate this impression, each vision has to be understood holistically and then systematically compared according to an external framework which can be used to examine agreements and disagreements between the visions. The previous chapter presented each leader's vision in their own words. This chapter, by contrast, offers the researcher's account on the relations within the data. The goal of this chapter is to provide a defensible answer to the research question of the whole study, that is, whether there is enough of a common vision in ELE to warrant calling it a movement or not.

### **5.1. INDIVIDUAL VISIONS**

Profiles in Chapter Four were presented according to the categories of the coding framework and summarized in Table 7. The next step of the analysis was to produce holistic summaries of each leaders' vision in relation to other visions of ELE. The vision was reconstructed as cutting across the theoretical, practical, and background categories analysed across Chapter Four.

Regardless of their diverse contexts, four dimensions of comparison appeared to be applicable to all eight leaders: core values of ELE, any specific content of ELE, any specific form or format of ELE, and the largest obstacle restricting the successful implementation of ELE. Each vision can be described in terms of its core values emerging from how the leaders had described both initial envisioning and subsequent implementation. Values were understood to convey what the leader seemed to believe in, promote, or express through their vision of liberal education. Visions can also be compared according to any content and form that are perceived as core or essential for particular embodiment of ELE. Importantly, not all leaders seemed to have specific preferences or ideas about such potential boundaries of ELE. Lastly, all leaders elaborated on what they believed to be the main impediment to the successful introduction of ELE in their contexts. There was a natural connection between the value and what is considered the biggest obstacle for each vision.

I produced summaries of each leader's vision according to the four dimensions mindful of other leaders as well. The resulting typology of the differences between the visions of ELE will be presented in Table 8.

*Table 8. A researcher's summary of the individual visions of first leaders*

|                     | Adriaansens  | Mikhailov                          | Axer                                    | Abrahám  | Koposov   | Borgert                     | Norgaard                                  | Tubbs                                   |
|---------------------|--|------------------------------------|---|--|---|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Values              | Efficiency<br>Democracy  | Judgement<br>Decency               | Trust<br>Autonomy                       | Intellectualism<br>Student-centeredness                    | Hope<br>Alternative   | Care<br>Reflexivity         | Conversation<br>Seriousness               | Difficulty<br>Integrity                 |
| Content             | Not specified  | Western<br>Intellectual<br>culture | Antiutilitarian<br>subject              | Great works of<br>the humanities<br>and social<br>sciences | Broad concepts<br>spanning disciplines<br>and methodologies | Not specified               | Values                                    | First<br>principles                     |
| Form                | Dutch<br>University<br>college   | Not<br>specified                   | Close reading                           | A well-<br>prepared<br>seminar                             | Alternative<br>institutional culture                        | A reflexive<br>conversation | A discussion<br>that has a<br>claim on us | A shared<br>exploration<br>of an aporia |
| Largest<br>obstacle | Disconnection<br>from the socio-<br>moral<br>dimension of<br>education | Internalised<br>passivity          | Individual or<br>disciplinary<br>egoism | Short attention<br>span                                    | Narrowmindedness  | Arrogance                   | Boredom                                   | Confidence<br>of binary<br>thinking     |

The next step for comparing the visions entailed composing narratives that would offer as holistic an understanding of ELE in each vision as possible. In a full case study of one vision would have produced a comprehensive understanding which can do justice to the historical and contemporary social forces behind an example of ELE. At the cost of bracketing out such a broad context, the methodology applied in this collective case study allowed me to compare the visions with each other according to their core elements. I decided to compose educational-philosophical case summaries which offer an encapsulated understanding of each vision of ELE. Unlike the profiles presented in Chapter Four, the summaries were not read or otherwise approved by the first leaders. Since ELE was to the core term to be defined through the case summaries, I purposefully avoided the term 'liberal education' therein.

Abrahám feared that higher education went astray by abandoning its fundamental dedication to introducing students to the intellectual culture. The marker for this decline was the absence of a true seminar as a form of engagement. A seminar would be centred on the Undead Texts, the great works of the humanities or the social sciences that are both profound and comprehensible, difficult and rewarding. Seminars on those require well-read teachers who are fundamentally sympathetic towards the students and are at the same time able to command respect and focus. Creating a good seminar should not be taken for granted: it requires preparation on both sides: a broader intellectual 'archaeology' on the teachers' side, and from the students an extension of their attention spans and a willingness to counter superficiality and find enjoyment in complex reasoning. Such encounters are student-centred

education inasmuch as an education in and through ideas. Students who internalise such education would become lifelong learners.

For Mikhailov, education was ultimately a tool for developing judgement alongside any new knowledge. During the Soviet times, this fundamental task was corrupted by totalitarian politics; afterwards, by the vulgar values promoted in a free market economy. If human beings were to learn about themselves, they needed to freely engage with the works of the Western intellectual culture, first censored, then ignored. There is no single or preferred model through which such an engagement should happen; what matters is that it happens at all, and in a serious manner. Mikhailov envisioned education as a way of becoming better, decent, truly free. Given its many enemies, the survival of such idealistic education is not warranted. But this does not mean we should not try to replace dishonoured obedience with the commitment to free expression at every opportunity. In this manner education cannot be disjoined from politics, though must be so much more than just that. A true education would never bring certainty.

Koposov believed that education requires engagement and taking risks; only then it could pave the way for an alternative to the socio-cultural shortcomings inherited from the past. In the Soviet period, academics made a pact of sorts: they deserted the public sphere and abandoned collective action, while the authorities left them to their arcane investigations. What was a survival strategy took a life of its own, and even when politics was transformed, the operational idea of higher education did not. For Koposov, this was the story behind the ideology of professionalism that was everything but what education in a democracy should be about. Education deals with broad concepts spanning disciplines and methodologies, theory and practice, academia and 'real life'. It is not about a professional competence only, but also about engagement in the wider world. To afford such education, the institutional culture in higher education must change as well, and the democratic values must be ingrained in daily interactions. The main problem was a limited incentive for students, teachers, and administrators to change their ways, to put real effort in observing and pursuing the connections even when the wider system did not reward it. But in that particular moment in history everything seemed possible. Education was naturally connected to a larger set of challenges, and perhaps less challenging to influence that politics. Done well, educational reform would contribute to a broader cultural, social, and perhaps even political change, though there is no denying that it was a task in the *longue durée*.

Adriaansens believed that education is an important part of the social reproduction which should be run in an efficient manner: achieve as much as possible within the limited resources at its disposal. Under the right conditions, higher education can contribute to both cognitive

and moral growth of students, providing for their future economic productivity but even more importantly, for the democratic habits of public dialogue, collaboration, tolerance, and responsibility. The college structure offers the best possible context for achieving those goals. With its manageable size of interdependencies between diverse people, college creates the conditions where democratic learning unfolds on its own. To a certain extent it does not really matter what is being taught, but in what manner and in what learning environment. The challenges in education are not that different from systemic challenges elsewhere: institutional design preventing the free-riding, promoting the culture of hard work, eliciting pride within the programme and the community it serves, monitoring performance and tweaking any shortcomings before they have a chance to escalate.

Axer saw education as a sphere for a protected type of human relations. Higher education has the tools and the ethos of a special kind of a community: one that is able to efficiently self-govern and ingrain the value of trust into every decision. It is a fundamentally welcoming space where people of different interests and from different generations can collaborate in a productive manner of a range of cross-border activities. This special status could potentially be used and abused in a number of ways, so it is of crucial importance to identify and eliminate any risk that the community is infiltrated, and the trust is lost. To make sure it stays away from the corrupting logic of external expectations, the entry point for an academic consideration should be close reading of texts, performances, or social relations, conducted in a participatory atmosphere of a republican community. Socialisation to higher education is a nurturing exercise. Students are important members of such academic community but must see themselves as both free to participate and obliged to honour its unwritten moral code. Individualism, as promoted by every part of educational system, was the main obstacle: yet without teamwork, surprises are unlikely events. This eventually undercuts learning.

Borgert's vision of education classified it as a caring industry, one which develops relations among humans and with their ecologies through a range of reflexive processes. The time and opportunities afforded in higher education for the careful discussion of any manner is truly unique and valuable. By collective exploration of the problems, weighing dissenting opinions, and generating collective solutions, universities engage in the fundamental process of sustaining the society even if their members are not always fully aware of it. As long as the model of a reflexive conversation is emulated in the classroom, the matter under discussion is not of primary importance. At the same time, universities should be aware of and responsive to the needs of the society which sustains them. Educating people to reflect on who they are, how they want to contribute to social causes, and how they might improve their long-term productivity are three areas for which higher education is responsible. The largest problem for

the university might be restoring its ability to debate harmoniously rather than antagonistically. It is however able to overcome it if it imaginatively searches for the recurrent themes and the stays true to its fondness for studious exploration in the public benefit.

For Tubbs anything that works as education is inextricably linked to difficulty. If one – a student, a teacher – is too certain about how to proceed, you are likely not doing the education the right way. Humans are immersed in tensions and aporias, but most of the time avoid facing them. But only through doing so one could hope to improve their understanding and integrity. The logic of self-discovery runs in parallel to self-loss; both are the work of education. Perhaps the most difficult topic for education are the first principles: self-standing, foundational proposition that cannot be derived from anything else. Modern liberal arts education is such a study of ancient and modern expeditions to uncover the first principles. It is modern because of the way modernity upended the ancient ways of studying the world. The first principles can best be studied in a seminar setting where people who know each other well can actually dedicate their full attention to joint exploration. Their challenge, and that of the tutor, would be to think beyond the binaries, to follow the question where it leads, not where we are ready to accept it does.

And finally, Nørgaard was a believer in conversation. If only education could be more like a conversation, higher education institutions would become a much more habitable place. A keen interest in other people, integration of perspectives, and friendship would finally take the driver's seat in such education. As in any conversation, there are no set rules, and no promises it would turn out to be worthwhile. But an intellectual conversation spanning theory and practice, academic and personal, knowing and being, more often than not is a beginning of a solution to the problems people care about. And those issues can ultimately be dragged back to values, so a point might be made to structure education in a way that it revolves around them. Two forms of education seem the most appropriate tools for this: close examination of the texts which shaped how our (Western) civilization, and others, were thinking about values in the past; and classroom discussion in which everyone is and is not an expert at the same time. Higher education might still offer time away from daily pressures, and in its explorative and reflexive task it cannot really be supplanted by any other social institution. The challenge is therefore to reorient higher education towards the ideal of a conversation between those who are alive and dead, young and old, specialists and amateurs. If we manage to instil honesty, seriousness, and sincerity into our classrooms, we could still have a *symposion* where people can truly speak from the heart. This is the best way of educating.

## 5.2. SITES OF CONSENSUS, POINTS OF CONTENTION

To complement the in-case analysis from the previous section, which reconstructed the vision of each leader in context and in relation to each other, I then performed a cross-case analysis of the collective phenomenon of vision for ELE among first leaders. Eight visions were compared with each other to notice the sites of consensus and points of contention. Some inferences relied on what had been explicitly said in the interviews, while some more heavily utilised my analysis of implicit assumptions ingrained in those visions. The cross-case analysis in this section was structured in terms of open and hidden agreements and disagreements between the visions of all leaders (see summary in Table 9).

*Table 9. Open and hidden agreements and disagreements between the visions of first leaders*

|        | Agreements  | Disagreements   |
|--------|---|---|
| Open   | The use of the concept  | Preferred phrasing  |
|        | Acknowledgement of other uses   | Relative importance of the concept for the vision   |
|        | ELE is European   | Role of English and internationalisation  |
|        | ELE is different and better than the dominant higher education delivery | Intended student profile  |
| Hidden | The concept is still useful   | Multi-, Inter-, Anti-disciplinary approach of ELE   |
|        | Higher expectations of ELE students                                     | Principal self-perception of the leader   |
|        | More egalitarian ethos  | Relation between ELE and personal development, employability, and academic reproduction           |
|        | ELE as an incremental reform  | Application of ELE to teaching, research, and outreach  |
|        |   | Diverse origin (intuitive, inspired, informed) and coherence (integrated, disintegrated, partial) |

### 5.2.1. OPEN AGREEMENTS

The first open agreement dealt with the universal use of the concept of liberal education during the interviews. Data selection relied on the self-description of their institution in the language of liberal education, and the Project Information Sheet might have further prompted it. All first leaders have at some point gone beyond this definition of the situation and elaborated on the meaning of some version of the common name. It would be difficult however to draw strong conclusions solely on this basis.

Furthermore, all leaders acknowledged the existence of other ELE developments in Europe and have not explicitly rejected their claim to use the label. While their awareness and opinions on such other developments varied, all first leaders seemed to accept some general connection

between their actions and that of others who had been practicing liberal education in Europe. This might suggest they saw ELE to some extent as a collective enterprise.

The third open agreement stated that all first leaders saw ELE as truly European, by which I mean not simply an American importation.<sup>145</sup> Some leaders acknowledged and discussed this source of inspiration for their developments in more detail than others, but none framed it simply as a version of an American undergraduate liberal arts degree or institution on the European soil. Instead of framing ELE in perhaps more immediately recognizable terms of American education, all first leaders made an effort to defend it as a grassroots innovation and/or a return to an abandoned European model of a university education. Excluding leaders of Private American Universities from this study might have affected this outcome. Still, all first leaders expounded their visions as genuinely embedded in European or national tradition and conditions of higher education. This was true irrespective of the amount of inspiration and support they had drawn from the US.

Lastly, each of the first leaders presented ELE as a different and in some way superior version of higher education. The philosophy of a liberal arts education was invoked to oppose, change, amend, or complement the unsatisfactory status quo with its pathologies of higher education that became mass in scale and narrow in scope higher education. The liberal arts medicine was prescribed for a whole range of educational ills: the disappearance of interest in the first principles, personal and social irrelevancy of university education, lack of pedagogical and curricular agency of students, unreflective career preparation, anonymity, systemic ineffectiveness of the disciplinary tracking model etc. Liberal education was presented as an alternative to all of those and more. Through pursuing the alternative, leaders believed they were offering a better approximation of what higher education should be, not only for their students, but also in the common interest.

### **5.2.2. OPEN DISAGREEMENTS**

In a similarly visible manner, the first leaders also disagreed about a range of issues. The first of those was the preferred phrasing for the concept, or to be more precise, in what way they have decided to refer to their ELE innovation. Five of the leaders used a variation on the 'liberal arts' theme,<sup>146</sup> while three experimented with a version of 'liberal education'<sup>147</sup>. Some leaders have used more than one label, especially when they were relating how they present it to different audiences, and more than one language. In a few cases liberal arts education

<sup>145</sup> See for example (Abrahám, 2012a).

<sup>146</sup> Liberal arts (three times), Liberal arts and sciences, Modern liberal arts,

<sup>147</sup> Liberal education; Value studies as a form of liberal education;

required another concept, for example 'university college' or 'interdisciplinarity', to convey the sense intended by the first leader.

The diversity in phrasing was also related to differences in relative prominence of the concept of liberal education in each vision. This was manifested not only in how often and how deeply the leaders engaged with the concept, but also whether their vision could or could not be presented without it. Some of the leaders believed the concept to be central to what they were trying to achieve and seemed more theoretically cautious about it. Others seemed to be primarily interested in matters beyond the philosophy of liberal arts education and used the concept only sparingly, for example as a supporting device for their arguments.

The third open disagreement related to the role of English and the international dimension. Three of four Eastern European institutions taught their degrees in national languages and the same number of Western European programmes teach in English. Theoretically, the internationalisation and teaching in English are connected: if a degree is supposed to attract international student body from more than 2-3 other countries, it would have to be offered in English. And if a degree is offered in English rather than a national language, this might both attract a particular type of student and alienate another. At the same time, not all programmes offered in English actively sought to attract a broad international student body: ECLA and UCU did, but MLA less so; Smolny was attractive particularly for students from NIS countries, and technically speaking, almost all EHU students are international.

It would naturally be difficult to infer causal relations between the vision and the language of instruction and the composition of student body in all cases. The decision about the language of instruction is a result of both the vision for the programme and the external conditions, the latter ranging from legal framework through broader cultural and social perceptions of 'international' education and all the way to the availability of faculty and capabilities of students. Those factors can of course change, as they did in case of BISLA: the institution started with a Slovak curriculum in 2006, slowly increased the share of courses in English and strengthened its international brand and eventually transitioned to a fully English curriculum in 2018. At the same time, the decision to stay with a national language in some cases was intentional: after considering a track or a larger share of courses in English in KAL, eventually Axer decided against it as it would undermine his vision for the institution.

The last open disagreement deals with what type of a student each institution leader said they hoped to attract.<sup>148</sup> The most inclusive approaches targeted all of the students who were

<sup>148</sup> The statements from the leaders do not have to reflect actual admissions decisions.

interested in ELE, a bit less inclusive were looking for work ethic on top of interest, and the most selective required both interest and work ethic as well as 'talent'. When a first leader started more than one institution, each ELE might have targeted a different student profile. The results were summarized in Figure 3 below.

*Figure 3. Desirable students' profiles for different institutions of first leaders*

|                | talent | diligence | interest |                |
|----------------|--------|-----------|----------|----------------|
| More selective | ECLA   | EHU       | UCU, UCR | Less selective |
|                | MISH   | BISLA     | Visby    |                |
|                | SHL    | Smolny    | MLA      |                |
|                |        | KAL       | IVS      |                |

The broadest approach addressed liberal arts education to all students who are interested in it. This interest could be related to curricular offerings, particularly combination of courses or study areas, to broader questions upon which the vision is founded, or to a perceived misalignment with alternative course offerings. In selecting their students, institutions relying on performance funding were driven by both the need to reach their admissions targets and reduce the eventual dropout. But the need to select from among the interested candidates was not of primary concern. Except for ECLA, all Western European programmes fell in this category.<sup>149</sup>

The second approach added work ethic on top of the interest. Considered candidates have to not only be interested in the liberal arts approach of the institution, but they have to be able to show they can keep up with the more challenging workload. The ways to assess evidence for this study attitude varied between institutions and even within one institution over time, but the responsibility was on the student to be a diligent learner before they are allowed to enter a liberal arts programme.

Lastly, three programmes expected their prospective candidates to not only be interested and diligent, but also to show some superior cognitive capabilities.<sup>150</sup> Those institutions saw themselves as catering to the high-achievers and decided to distribute their offerings according to merit, in some sense. The logic of this was that liberal arts institution either offers more than a regular programme, or demands more preparation to benefit from its offer, and given the limited study places on offer, there is a need for a selection, ideally as unbiased as possible.

<sup>149</sup> In the Netherlands, university-bound population with VWO qualification is already pre-selected at the secondary school level.

<sup>150</sup> This type of ELE intersect with the honours programmes (that might, or might not, be interdisciplinary in nature); for a review of recently established European honours programmes see (Wolfensberger, 2015).

There were some interesting deviations from the dominant ways of presenting the functions of ELE in the literature. None of the first leaders referred to the human capital argument in its plain economic sense. Even the leaders of talent-oriented institutions have not framed ELE in general as a tool for social stratification according to merit, but more as a framework to provide enhanced incentives and challenges for those best prepared to make good use of them. Not all Eastern European leaders saw ELE as a contributing to democratisation, even as they universally discussed the role of historical, social, and political transformation in the backdrop for their programmes.

### **5.2.3. HIDDEN AGREEMENTS**

The first thing all leaders seemed to be in implicit agreement about was that calling their programmes ‘liberal education’ was somehow warranted and useful. It is not obvious why any of them would have chosen to do so in a first place, given the complexities in its past use. There is no practice of present use in Europe, and no clear customary connotations to positively valued models elsewhere. Apart from a few American universities, primarily in London, Paris, and the South of Europe, the term ‘liberal arts (education)’ did not refer to any easily institutional models easily accessible to the audiences of those leaders, especially before the Internet era. It is therefore relevant that they all have chosen to nevertheless introduce it in the contexts of their countries.

As a common point of reference, ‘liberal arts’ served a double purpose. Firstly, it facilitated comparisons between institutions analysed in this study and others who also self-describe in this language. On the other hand. It also discouraged from comparison to programmes that preferred other related terms, for example interdisciplinarity. Furthermore, for the audiences of the first leaders the concept of ‘liberal arts’ very likely suggested a general American orientation and a certain alienation from the ways higher education operated in each country.<sup>151</sup> It is not clear to what extent either choice was intentional on behalf of the leaders, but it certainly influenced their perception.

The second hidden agreement is related to increased expectations of the students as compared to the regular university degree. Students had more contact with the faculty, primarily within the classroom, and were expected to become co-creators of their education. This was because liberal education was discursively connected to freedom as a goal of education. In many cases liberal education was also practically translated into freedom as a means: enhanced curricular agency challenged the traditional perception of a passive pupil by

<sup>151</sup> I purposefully avoid speaking of a ‘European’ model of a university, because I am not sure there is enough historical and structural congruence to claim there is a referent for that term.

treating students as adults ready to choose their own courses and assume responsibility for those choices (this argument was especially prominent in Eastern Europe). But MLA used the increased contacts to help students of perhaps less elite background to successfully progress through their education. This counterexample shows the relevance of practice and background for the theory and proves that freedom as means was not a universal understanding of ELE.

The third hidden agreement related to egalitarian ethos conducive to horizontal and reciprocal learning between the teachers and the students. Instead of the expert-apprentice transmission of knowledge model the leaders claimed or assumed had dominated higher education establishments, liberal education facilitated multidirectional exchanges and eventually, growth and transformation. In this paradigm, teachers learn during teaching, too (as goes the ancient Chinese proverb), and are permitted to say 'I do not know' in the classroom context, which in some countries was a significant departure from the practice. Rather than only passing the checkpoints of courses and degree learning outcomes, students pursue the elusive dream of the organic development of their interests. This general ethos informed the ultimate end of a liberal education, and sometimes was also a mode of operation. The daily practice of egalitarian liberal education was producing learning structures with flattened hierarchies where a joint exploration can proceed without a predetermined end goal. At small programs, it also meant that students might have had an option to 'request the module', and the institution would consider arranging it to fit the interests of a particular cohort of students. At the same time, not all programmes saw immediate interactional flattening of hierarchies between the students and the teachers as possible or desirable, and some retained much more of a teachers' authority in the classroom as others, even if the overall ethos of the programme was to be more egalitarian than elsewhere.

The final hidden agreement saw liberal education as an incremental reform: it is one variant of how higher education can be structured that fits one subset of university-bound population. In the past, leaders in Poland, the Netherlands, and to a lesser extent in Russia harboured a hope that their experiments would eventually bring a larger institutional reform or a change of paradigm in higher education more generally, but at the time of interviews this was no longer deemed possible. The targeted recipients of liberal education were of different social groups and strata. Some leaders were worried they might be predominantly attracting educated, middle-class students of cultured backgrounds. Other leaders did not raise it as a matter of concern. The emerging consensus was that liberal education is for some but not all students, and the ambition was no longer to implement it everywhere (at least in the predictable future) but rather to ensure the already existing programmes survive.

#### 5.2.4. HIDDEN DISAGREEMENTS

Of the four areas of comparison, the hidden or implicit disagreements in how each leader envisioned liberal education were probably both the most interesting and controversial.

The first hidden disagreement related to the specific solution to the problems of disciplinary education. Some of the leaders proposed a multi-disciplinary solution: a liberal arts education would include a collection of disciplinary courses with the responsibility of integration placed upon the shoulders of the student. This approach left the logic of disciplines largely in place but called upon higher education to abandon the artificial limitations preventing students from taking the courses they were interested in, if only they met set requirements (for each course, and for the breadth in general curriculum).

Another subset of leaders operationalised liberal education as an interdisciplinary enterprise which means that various disciplinary approaches have to meet within the curriculum and/or course in a purposeful manner. This would normally require an adaptation of a courses normally offered to students of a particular discipline to the specific conditions of the liberal arts programme. A range of strategies might be employed towards this goal: theme- or problem-oriented course, co-teaching, alternative pedagogy or assessment. In this scenario the task of an interdisciplinary integration is primarily a concern for the leader and the teacher.

At least two leaders had a very different attitude: anti-disciplinarity. They believed that liberal education deals with questions that take precedence over whatever academic discipline, and therefore pursuing those questions would be ill-served by applying the conceptual or methodological apparatus those questions equip us with. Rather, the goal is to structure a curriculum according to those questions and allow the investigation to follow according to the overall vision for a programme, but not some disciplinary toolkit. Programmes like this were probably the most radical attempt to rethink what liberal education could be but were also naturally the hardest to integrate with disciplinary pathways before (student and faculty recruitment), during (academic exchanges), and after studies (further education and labour market recognition).

The second disagreement stemmed from the self-perception of each leader with regards to their primary role. A case might be made that the eight leaders had a mixture of the four principal roles: a teacher, a dean, an educationalist, and a social visionary. Those ideal types refer to different focal points of the individual vision of each leader: on the individual student, on the broader institution, on improving education, or on improving society. My interpretation of the relative placement of each leader on those two axes is presented in Figure 4 with the middle rows and columns meaning 'both A and B'.

Figure 4. Relative personal investment of first leaders

|                  |    |             |        |              |
|------------------|----|-------------|--------|--------------|
|                  |    | Institution |        |              |
|                  | HA | NK          | LB, AM |              |
| Better education | SA | JA, TN      |        | Better world |
|                  | NT |             |        |              |
|                  |    | Individual  |        |              |

This mapping exercise, especially since it was based mostly on the interviews and short biography rather than overall life history, is not a precise or irrefutable tool. I would argue that some of the differences between the visions seem related to those four ideal orientations. Whether one considers themselves as a teacher or as a teachers' conductor mattered in how the first leaders perceived and presented liberal arts education, as did the ultimate ambition to either contribute only to an improvement of an educational institution or to a broader social change.

The third major hidden disagreement was related to the relative placement of liberal education on the tripartite matrix of the traditionally stated goals of higher education: Bildung (or personal self-actualisation and self-cultivation), academic advancement and reproduction (Nachwuchs), and employability. Mapping the relative position of the vision for liberal education against those three goals (see Figure 5 below), we can see that all but one leader had tried to negotiate between those competing aims.<sup>152</sup> This allows now to discuss a few related points.

Figure 5. Comparison of goals for ELE (Bildung, Nachwuchs, Employability)

|          |    |    |  |                |  |    |  |          |
|----------|----|----|--|----------------|--|----|--|----------|
|          |    |    |  | <u>B</u><br>HA |  |    |  |          |
|          |    |    |  | TN, NT         |  |    |  |          |
|          |    | SA |  | NK             |  | LB |  |          |
|          | JA |    |  |                |  |    |  |          |
| <u>N</u> |    | AM |  |                |  |    |  | <u>E</u> |

The largest variation occurred in the attitudes towards employability. Some leaders believed that liberal education provided a superior preparation for the current job market, even if the liberal arts degree and philosophy are not broadly recognized and integrated with the needs of

<sup>152</sup> And even Adriaansens, over time, became more invested in the role of undergraduate research.

European economies. Other leaders saw employability as a side effect: they conceded that employability is a valid concern, and liberal education might provide the graduates with valuable skills and knowledge across the disciplines, but nevertheless did not see this as a major or the most important objective. Other leaders considered employability as a force to corrupt liberal education which should be resisted; those two leaders did not speak about employability at all.

A related point was the scope of higher education activities to which the liberal education paradigm should apply. Most leaders envisioned liberal education as a paradigm for teaching only; even if they saw the benefits of liberal education for other spheres, they did not advocate for a change in practices related to those other spheres. Others, particularly those in Eastern Europe, were keen to see it as a paradigm for both teaching and research, in connection to oft-raised Humboldtian ideal of the 'unity of teaching and research' (famously restated in the universalist manner in the Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988). The Humboldtian orientation assumed university education to be also removed from the broader social concerns. Lastly, one leader used liberal education as a vision for teaching, research, and outreach or the third mission. In this interpretation liberal education had the potential to reorient the complete repertoire of activities in a higher education institution.

The final hidden disagreement is related to formal qualities of those visions, specifically their character and coherence. In the first dimension, visions of liberal education can be classified as intuitive, inspired, and informed contributions to its existing repertoire. Three leaders claimed they had no or very limited knowledge of the concept of liberal education when they started their experiments that eventually were referred to in this way by themselves or others. After two decades, it was impossible to determine whether they had actually followed this 'intuitive' pathway,<sup>153</sup> but it seemed relevant that the first leaders chose to present their visions in this way as mainly a result of individual ingenuity. Three leaders were more directly inspired by American liberal arts scene, through study visits or collaborations with US institutions, and were considering their ELE developments against this backdrop. It was interesting to note that the intermediaries (for example Peter Rose, Bard College, and the Endeavor Foundation) were mentioned by the leaders in this category, while essays and studies on US liberal arts only occasionally. The last subcategory of leaders sought to make an informed contribution to the discourse and practice of liberal education. Those leaders, having extensively read in the tradition of liberal education, came to a conclusion that existing models are not satisfactory, and what was to become their ELE developments had been conceived as a new and improved

<sup>153</sup> Especially given that two of those leaders had since acquired some first-hand experience of US liberal arts and were in contact with US liberal educators.

embodiment of liberal education. At different stages, those leaders became connected to US liberal arts scene as well. Still, theirs was neither an idiosyncratic vision nor simply an emulation of a US practice, but a full-scale philosophical proposal for others to consider as a new version of liberal education.

Related to this is an issue of coherence of each vision for liberal education. On the one hand of the spectrum, three leaders appeared to have integrated visions for liberal education. Those visions systematically linked a broader range of theoretical, practical, and contextual aspects of liberal education, such as the external aim, admissions, pedagogy, advertising to students, etc. Having such a coherent vision is a privilege, as it takes time and a supporting environment to develop one and this coherency might become an obstacle should the circumstances change rapidly.

On the other end of the spectrum was one of the leaders who appeared to have no resemblance of a coherent vision for liberal education specifically, even if they had a vision for higher education in general. In this case, it would be difficult to argue that a vision for liberal education drives the institution, but rather provides a source of inspiration or general sense of direction.

Between those two extremes, the remaining four leaders developed a partial vision of liberal education, either purposefully limiting where liberal education should be applied or because they were prevented from applying it in other areas by external factors. The latter might include legal frameworks, cultural expectations, or political constraints.

### **5.3. INTRODUCING THE EMERGING THEMES**

In the last two sections, I first presented the typology of eight holistic visions on their own terms and then offered an analysis of the sixteen open and hidden agreements and disagreements between them. The result was a multi-layered picture combining how individual visions can be presented on their own terms (as much as this is ever possible), and how the general phenomenon can be approached on the comparative terms of a researcher. At this point of my analysis, I was wondering how the two approaches to data analysis could inform each other and whether there might be a way of understanding ELE as a phenomenon that would account for the similarities, differences, and the integrity of each approach.

The result was identification of the three themes that withstood the test of multiple in- and between-case queries. The process of arriving at them was hermeneutical in the sense that I was constantly moving from the close-reading of the interviews to the results of my analyses and back. The themes were purposefully broad and integrative, spanning as much ground as

possible between the inner workings of a student's psyche and the social embeddedness of a liberal arts institution.

The three themes should therefore not be understood as simply commonalities in theory of liberal education, or a result of a rule-based thematic analysis, in any strict sense of the word. They might more appropriately be understood as the result of interpretative processes of a researcher who tried to stay intellectually engaged with the first leaders, interview data, their institutions, and the broader context in which the previous three operated. While not objective, the themes resulted from an exposure to multiple biases and various reflexivity-enhancing activities, from jottings through conversations to conference presentations.

Methodologically speaking, the only validity measure of such freely-constructed themes is their explanatory power with regards to the state of previous research, the current practice, and the likely dilemmas lying ahead of ELE. The process of arriving at the three themes made them therefore open to a challenge. At the same time, a successful challenge would require that the alternative could provide a more convincing interpretation of the result of the collective case study presented, and the larger state of ELE. I could not find any, but this does not mean they do not exist.

The three themes that I claim to be tenets of a common vision of ELE are ontological complexity, transformative pedagogy, and organisational alternative. They refer to the substance of ELE, but the way they are constructed matters as well and will be discussed later in 5.7 In the next three sections, I will introduce and provide evidence for each of those themes, before explaining in more details how I believe those themes to operate and finally returning to the question whether the three themes in this sense warrant calling ELE a movement.

#### **5.4. THEME ONE: ONTOLOGICAL COMPLEXITY**

The first theme related to the epistemological and ontological complexity of the world. Liberal education arises from and addresses the interdependencies in everything one experiences. This theme was most visible when the first leaders portrayed liberal education through the lens of integration.

The cognitive dimension of this theme proclaimed that any particular discipline offers but a partial insight into any matter. The difference between those disciplines and liberal education lies in the promise of a comprehensive understanding. Only the latter truly reflects the Ciceronian dictum that 'all liberal arts have something of a common bond', as inscribed in the

conference room of Axer's institute. This connection is in the world, it does not depend on our capturing it. 'Logos binds us all together', Tubbs said in his interview, while the question of first principles 'does not belong to any particular academic discipline'.

This meaning of complexity translated quite well into the curricular realities. Even in the multi-disciplinary situation of UCU, Adriaansens was offering fellowships to some of the teachers to design signature courses that would cross the disciplinary lines. Abrahám created a curriculum that offered instruction in the political sciences only in name, while in reality it was oriented on the ideas forming an intellectual culture. Without similar external constraints, Nørgaard developed a value studies curriculum that allowed him to put the pluralism in the spotlight: not only acknowledge the diverse and related ways of perceiving the world, but actually putting those epistemological and ontological perspectives in direct conversation with each other, caring very little if others would call it 'academic' enough.

Transcending the disciplinary divisions was even more visible with regards to the socio-political dimension that focusses less on the origins and more on the consequences of such complexity. An increasing number of global and local challenges can be described as 'wicked problems', which is evidently clear in the discussions about climate change. Traditional higher education programmes seem ill suited to prepare its graduates to integrate the necessary perspectives, though. Liberal education, with its orientation on questions rather than answers, encourages its graduates to take a step back from any of the partial answers and see the larger picture. It hopes to not simply pass the bits of knowledge, but to develop the skills necessary to find, assess, and integrate new relevant knowledge and just as importantly, to discuss, promote, and defend what seems to be a better solution. Since wicked problems require diverse teams to come up with such solution, there is also a behavioural component in the liberal education which relates to what I would call 'habits of heart', for example reflexivity, curiosity, and openness.

None of the first leaders in this study was a promoter of the 'great challenges' curriculum in a strict sense, but it does not mean they did not act on a similar set of assumptions. For example, Kuposov saw the problems in the classroom as rooted in a wider 'ideology of professionalism', which was a historical and cultural complex; the size and the importance of this challenge made even small liberal arts innovation relevant well beyond its headcount. Liberal education was a wholly different paradigm in that it required a shift in how the world is perceived and what types of interventions are seen as legitimate. Not far from this vision was Borgert when he was asking how universities can get back to the communities who support them, and how can students contribute to the society. The answer to both questions had to be different than disinterested exploration. Borgert believed in a reflexive conversation, first

among the students and the teacher in the classroom, but eventually, between the disciplines and between the broader communities that universities serve.

The push for integration took many shapes. For Adriaansens, the diverse components of a university college structure would turn the latter into a learning environment for this study of complexity. Axer was especially fond of his educational collaborations with heterogenous actors: rebellious students he tutored, astronomy professors he taught with, Kenyan guenons who accepted him as one of their own. Mikhailov wanted to reclaim the study of the full human being with as many tools as possible, especially books that were previously censored. Tubbs pushed the complexity even further challenging the status of the boundaries, calling for aporetic questioning, and pointing out our complicity in erecting boundaries that hurt.

Lifting ontological and epistemological complexity from its anaemic role of a 'breadth' component into a constitutive tenet of liberal education, the first leaders raised the bar for the teachers and the students. What counts as a satisfactory educational experience changes in a fundamental way if no question can be excluded upfront as 'irrelevant', or beyond the remit of the course. While the teachers are encouraged to admit the things they do not know, the students are constantly pushed to close the gaps in their ignorance. While the world might be connected whether we want it or not, it becomes a true calling to capture as much of this complexity as possible into our conscience. We all are part of this complexity anyway: it is going to affect us whether we want it or not, but this also mean that we can affect it if we learn how to do it well.

## **5.5. THEME TWO: TRANSFORMATIVE PEDAGOGY**

The second theme is related to transformative pedagogy. Liberal education is not just a tool, but a phase of reorientation achieved in relation to other people. This theme was most visible when the first leaders discussed the importance and forms of engagement through learning.

The cognitive component of this theme stemmed from the fact that traditional higher education years are a volatile period of reorientation. Rather than ignore it as an inconvenience, liberal education should capitalise on the potential of this transformation and help students find their own place in the world. It is not only that the rational part of the brain develops for a longer period than we previously assumed; the whole set of relations in which a person is embedded when they enter higher education looks different after they leave. How students perceive themselves as well as others, and the patterns of their participation in collective activities is likely to change, too. Liberal education should reflect and support this parallel transformation.

The difference between more pre-structured regular university courses and the liberal education alternatives analysed in this research lends itself well to considering the theme of transformation and engagement. Adriaansens believed that both an open curriculum and a college context require students to defend their choices and bear responsibility for their actions. Mikhailov and Koposov were even more concerned about activating students and encouraging them to speak publicly for what they believe in. Different pedagogical tools and structures might be necessary to really affect this kind of a change. Moreover, although implicit in most interviews, teacher training for liberal education was also an area of concern.

Without an established career path, liberal education courses deal with an already pre-selected group of candidates. Viewing higher education as a time to 'find yourself' is generally a privilege of the better off families, especially in tuition-based environments. Despite some attempts to take finances out of the equation, a certain type of a student was more likely to seriously consider those programmes. Paradoxically, this might have made engagement easier once the programme has started, as its students were already more open to being challenged. MLA was perhaps the most radical in this respect, as it shunned away from 'selling' the course to prospective students: it was open to all who already internalised the need to pursue the questions defining the world and themselves, but at the same time it was not painting itself as anything else for the sake of getting more students in the classroom. Through many writing assignments and cohort-based learning, students were able to monitor how they are changing by engaging with the questions of freedom and discipline at different levels.

One of the goals of liberal education is therefore self-actualisation of the student. Too often higher education demands a change from the student according to a pre-determined goal. As Koposov put it: 'I'm your professor – I'm your ideal. – I hate that. I still hate that.' The question is how to avoid simply exchanging one set of role models for another. Nørgaard believed that a pluralistic analysis of values can achieve this, especially when two teachers who themselves hold different perspectives carefully eviscerate the dilemmas embedded in literature, works of art, or political discourse. Axer paid more attention to everything outside the classroom, personally setting up 'project teams' of students and teachers with diverse enough attitudes and interests. In each of those scenarios liberal education was envisioned to facilitate a personal transformation expressive of the freedom of the student.

The transformative pedagogy theme had naturally a socio-political dimension, too. In all studied cases, liberal education was introduced in the context of democracy which is fundamentally based on citizen participation in the collective governance. Adriaansens called for students to 'develop a cause to fight for', and Koposov believed that intellectuals – liberal arts alumni included – 'should intervene in politics and help to sustain democracy'. One should

not underestimate the degree to which such value-laden approach departs from the rules of regular academia.

As democratic societies become increasingly pluralist, they would require more of what Martha Nussbaum called 'narrative imagination' (Nussbaum, 1998), an ability to empathise with people whose situation and values we do not share. This is not an approach one can safely assume to be taught well enough at school, but neither are regular university programmes well-equipped to teach it, too. Borgert was perhaps the furthest in his disillusionment with the traditional academia: he summarised that most seminars see a professor saying 'Well, you are wrong'.

This is not to say that transformative pedagogy must necessarily mean everybody is right about everything. Abrahám would particularly object this, as he called for humility on the side of the students as they participate in the seminar. This humility is however not to be imposed from the outside but has to grow organically in the student as they realise how much they still do not know. Since the answer is not yet known, the inquiry becomes a collective endeavour of students and the teachers. Scale matters. Close relations in the classroom, and faculty mentoring out of it, mean that learning happens 'in a community of learners, not in a stadium of competitors' (Greenwood).

It is through a civilised dialogue that a group can collectively reach the solution, or at least better understand the conditions of the problem. And if an institutional culture were created in which people do not fear to make mistakes, but also do not see themselves as infallible, an educational institution can truly serve as a laboratory for democracy. This would be not a small role to play for liberal education.

## **5.6. THEME THREE: ORGANISATIONAL ALTERNATIVE**

The last theme revolved around organisational alternative. As the dominant logic of higher education is fundamentally inimical to the presence and the promise of liberal education, attempts to create the latter must start from reclaiming a niche where such logic does not apply. This theme was most pertinent whenever the first leaders spoke about liberal education being the difference and making the difference.

Organisational alternative is a 'condition of possibility' for liberal education; without it, any attempts to pursue ontological diversity and transformational pedagogy would eventually be corrupted. This theme deals directly with the limits of compromise and strategies of the guerrilla war against the hegemonic models of higher education. When they first started, the first leaders met with either indifference or outright rejection. There is a case to treat all of

them as, to a certain extent, visionaries: they envisioned an alternative model for higher education that is both needed and possible. It matters that in their own ways, all of them achieved some success. But it also matters that none had achieved everything they hoped for.

The cognitive dimension of such organisational alternative dealt with rethinking how knowledge should be produced and transmitted in higher education. As universities can be seen as Tayloristic organisations, compartmentalising the world into discrete domains of professional expertise, their potential to nurture liberal education is drastically low.<sup>154</sup> The question is how the first leaders could develop their innovations without replicating the same model on a smaller scale.

It was more than just a symbolic gesture that ECLA faculty taught their courses in the own offices, where they also met with the students for tutorials. Borgert, Axer, and Abrahám created dedicated spaces where teachers and students could meet outside classes. Structures were important, as was the rhetoric. Axer considered his academic sub-community as driven by the oppositional ethos of Polish intelligentsia offering illegal 'underground education' in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> century; he did not shy away from stating that his goal is 'breaking through departmental walls' and 'freeing students from the narrowest cage possible' in which the logic of a university wants to lock them. Borgert believed that a broader type of professional can only arise from an education that was not narrowly professional in nature; towards the end of his term he was negotiating with all departments the introduction of a distribution requirement and a core course around sustainability. Abrahám argued that only through small scale seminars and ample time for reading and reflection students could critically engage with the intellectual culture and that Slovak universities would never afford that. Mikhailov was even more pessimistic in this respect and proceeded to establish a private institution long before it could have been known that in state universities liberal education had 'no future at all'.

Differences between countries made it more or less difficult to establish a liberal arts programme in its own right. Accreditation as a liberal arts programme was impossible for Abrahám, and complicated for Axer and Kuposov. Adriaansens, on the other hand, capitalised on the timing and his positions for a full-scale implementation of a liberal arts and sciences degree. Universities are generally conservative institutions and it normally takes both ingenuity and luck to establish a new programme that will survive. With a varying degree of success, all first leaders were able to achieve this using the liberal arts idea.

<sup>154</sup> This means challenging 'taken-for-granted rules about what constitutes a proper university' (Branković, 2018, p. 12).

Where 'alternative arrangements' were made within existing university structures, leaders took care to enshrine their developments from the external factors to the largest extent possible. Adriaansens succeeded in securing financial autonomy of a university college, and the superior preparation of its students combined with sound finances gave the dean some leverage over prospective teachers. Koposov used strategic teaching assignment as a tool for building support for Smolny in the academic senate and other faculties. Tubbs was able to secure the place for a small MLA programme even during the times when the scale was used as an argument for closing other courses; decision makers must have seen the programme as extremely valuable for the identity of the university. As if being a private liberal arts institution in the home of the state research university model was not enough, Nørgaard successfully recognized the value studies degree in its original form at the famously inflexible German bureaucracy.

The limitations of this strategy became more clearly visible with regards to the socio-political dimension of organisational alternative. Even when they managed to be rule-makers in their own institution, the first leaders had to accept the rules of a broader higher education enterprise in their countries. The legal framework, established pathways, and social sentiments made integrating liberal education into the higher education system generally difficult, and in some cases more so than in others. This had consequences for the eventual scale achieved by those programmes, too.

Private institutions, by and large, struggled more in this respect. On the one hand, ECLA never managed to attract many German students, on the other, ECLA graduates who continued their studies in Germany were often disillusioned. The symbolic distance between a 'regular' university and ECLA was considerable, hurting the position of the latter as a partner for collaboration and making it more difficult to grow its recognition and the student body. Still this was part of the appeal for those who were coming. Mikhailov eventually became a leader of a university in exile, serving Belarussians but no longer on Belarussian soil, with the mixed blessing of turning his university into a political project. Financial and mental barriers were long holding back the growth of BISLA, while geography made it more challenging to attract ambitious and internationally mobile students.

Opening graduate degrees to alumni of liberal arts programmes was probably the biggest challenge. The Bologna Process did not result in the universal reorientation from the disciplines to learning outcomes that would made it easier to integrate liberal education in the current system; practices differ between countries, institutions and departments.

Initially, Axer, Adriaansens, and to some extent Koposov were hoping that their liberal arts laboratories can spark a larger change within higher education. After others saw the results of

their models, others will follow suit and the whole university should eventually become closer to their visions of liberal arts. The Hannah Arendt Prize was awarded by IWM out of a similar hope of promoting ‘catalysts of change’. The latter did not really happen.

Without a systemic solution, achievements in turning one institution into a model deserve a particular attention. In Eastern Europe, Axer’s MISH inspired 8 other public research universities to develop similar programmes. This brought an opportunity to a small group of students in many regions to study across the faculties. AAL simultaneously linked those universities creating a pathway for inter-university supplement to a study in one institution. With varying success, MISH was also replicated in a handful of institutions in Eastern Europe.

Around the same time Adriaansens established UCU, creatively positioned at the border of the existing legal framework. Its results and support attracted the attention of other universities, and within the next two decades almost all Dutch comprehensive universities created at least one liberal arts and sciences programmes themselves. The original Dutch mix model has been adapted to the needs and conditions of other universities, with the usual mixture of isomorphism and innovation. The Netherlands have now a LAS sub-sector built around the sixth most popular bachelor’s study course in the country. One possible interpretation is that Adriaansens’ vision was seen as the least threatening to established interests of the universities in terms of budgets, staffing, and reputation; but other interpretations are certainly possible.

## **5.7. HOW THE THEMES WORK**

I am therefore proposing the three themes – ontological complexity, transformational pedagogy, and organisational alternative – as the tenets of a common vision for ELE. After discussing their meanings, in this section I am focussing on how those themes operate in casting the contours of this common vision.

First of all, each theme had both a positive and a negative identity. In the previous sections I have focussed on the positive identity or meaning of ELE, trying to show the building blocks of each individual vision. But just as importantly both eight individual visions and a common vision of ELE were constructed against the backdrop of what ELE is not.

Envisioning liberal education, each leader was proposing something new inasmuch as resisting what already existed in their direct contexts. The three interrelated themes together paint the vision of liberal education as a bit of a negative of the features in the dominant higher education complex: the disintegration of knowledge, numbing instruction, and the Tayloristic organisation of universities. Individual visions and the common vision of ELE were both

mediated by the perceived problems of higher education. This negative identity is reminiscent of the situation described by Grant and Riesman:

These faculty (...) shared common dislike – sometimes hatred – of the dominant university. They were united in their opposition but not their aspirations. They had no common vision (...) but they had private visions of what a college ought to be, and they hoped their dream could be brought into reality (Grant and Riesman, 1978, p. 360).

Such double identity has consequences for both description and communication. It makes it likely that ELE would not be very coherent, since its coherence stems primarily from the opposition to the other side. Discussing ‘the abominations of Leviticus’, Mary Douglas (1966) has shown how this kind of identity building can bring some sense from the outside to a set of regulations that do not seem to elicit sense from within.

ELE however is more of a project than a set of rules, so the rhetorical role of negative identity might be even more important. One can probably argue that the description of ‘regular’ higher education by the first leaders is at times hyperbolic, especially when it comes to its shortcomings. This should be seen as a part of a larger strategy where description is amplified by emotions to motivate action: in this case, building support for ELE. Raising support is part of the role of a leader, after all.

Each of the themes should therefore be understood in both positive and negative sense at the same time. They highlight a general orientation of ELE in relation to the attitudes towards the world, the student, and the university ELE resists. At both levels – individual and common vision – ELE is co-constructed by the things it opposes.

Secondly, the three themes capture ELE in confluence of unity and diversity. Thinking of ELE through those themes suggests a common direction but not a common essence. This conceptualisation not only accommodates significant differences between ELE programmes but is enriched through the deviations and tensions between them. The three themes provide a framework for thinking about ELE that is fundamentally welcoming towards difference as long as it does not reject the general orientation towards ontological complexity, transformative pedagogy, and organisational alternative.

Each theme was introduced with examples of cognitive and socio-political problems that liberal education was introduced to address. The list of those problems is not complete, and there are even more solutions offered under the name of liberal education. The contextual approach ingrained in the themes might mean that at the descriptive level, ‘the varieties might well exceed the common features’, see: (Spiegelberg, 1965). Possibly, ELE is also multivalent,

with a diversity of visions accentuating various aspects of the three themes. It might even be possible to reconstruct some oppositions within ELE while still subscribing to a position that finds value in speaking of ELE as a common vision.

This situation is possible because the three themes are abstract. They are heuristics that help make sense of a complex and ambiguous phenomenon. They are not practical in the sense that relying only on those three themes would probably make it impossible to know how to create a new liberal arts programme. Without knowing the context, it would be difficult to understand and fully appreciate any individual vision, or arguably, the common vision of ELE as well.

As with all abstract models, they offer an approximation of reality. Some of the leaders paid more attention to one dimension of ELE than to others. This could be seen not only in how much, but also how passionately and intriguingly they spoke about particular topics and propositions. This is probably natural. What I do argue, however, is that each leader has spoken in a non-trivial way of all three dimensions of ELE as proposed here.

Another point is that in addition to positive-negative identity, unity-diversity, and abstract character, I want to stress that those themes are based on a snapshot methodology employed in this study. It does not properly entertain the changes within each vision, and in ELE in general, as they unfolded over time. An opportunity for a structured post-factum reflection would have likely produced a more general, abstract, and static picture of ELE that would arise from the historical examination of its graduate development. It seemed reasonable to opt for this approach in this study, but it had a bearing on the results.

A snapshot also means that there are likely variants of liberal education that have not been studied or even implemented yet. It is not possible to predict with certainty whether they all would fall into the three themes or not. The flexible character of this framework might make it easier to accommodate a range of legitimate options as long as they do not directly contradict any of the themes, but the what counts as 'legitimate' and 'contradicting' would be always open to judgement.

Finally, the common vision of ELE based on the three themes is not a prescriptive model, but a temporary approximation that could and should be used to inspire further innovations. Just as the first leaders did not receive a handbook of ELE, those interested in advancing its cause today would be ill-served by an illusion of universality. Forms of ELE were changing in the past, and they are likely to continue to do so in the future. Those seeking to establish its true essence, and those who reject it could ever exist, can probably both agree that the three themes offered here could not be this kind of essence. The vision presented here is simply an attempt to capture the commonalities between the studied programmes that might likely be

found in the other forms of ELE today, but that does not mean they necessarily offer some golden path for understanding and introducing ELE tomorrow. What they can do is help capture some of the important aspects of ELE and highlight some of the tensions that will require creative solutions, perhaps in the near future.

It is in light of those five clarifications that I can now argue that there seems to be a common vision for liberal education, coalescing around ontological complexity, transformative pedagogy, and organisational alternative, that would warrant calling ELE a movement.

## **5.8. ANSWERING THE QUESTION: EUROPEAN LIBERAL EDUCATION AS A COUNTERMOVEMENT**

The analysis conducted in this chapter allows to answer the central question of this research: whether there is enough of a common vision to call ELE a movement. This question was conceptualised in four models discussed in section 3.1.2.

Based on my empirical study, I propose the following answer. The open and hidden agreements as well as the arguments raised in the descriptions of the three themes provided evidence of commonalities. The formal qualities of the themes and the in-case analyses suggest unconscious adoption of those commonalities among the first leaders. Together, the common vision of a mediated nature is congruent with only one model: a countermovement.

The commonalities captured in the three themes fulfil the first criterion of a positive and rebalancing character of ELE. They should be interpreted as three ways to complement departmental, disciplinary universities by addressing their shortcomings in addressing the need for the integration of knowledge, the transformative power of higher learning, and the need for organisational sustainability through a different operational logic. And yet those commonalities were not explicitly proposed, or acknowledged, by the leaders of ELE programs embodying those three themes under the common name of liberal education; it is a work of a researcher to identify the aims, support, methods and the social based of various ELE that allows us to argue for its positive and alternative character. First leaders, largely unaware of each other's attempts, have been addressing limitations of the Tayloristic research university, by creating local alternatives embodying a common, unacknowledged vision proposed in this dissertation.

A range of arguments can be raised to strengthen the case for seeing ELE as a countermovement. First of all, it would be difficult to argue that a group of people are part of the movement in a positive sense of the word if none of them self-identifies as such. The case for a movement is further weakened by the fact that the first leaders do not mention the three themes, or some other principles shared by other leaders. The lack of identification and

explicit acknowledgement of common principles is however congruent with the counter-movements hypothesis. Counter-movements are defined by what they oppose, and members see counter-movements as merely means to achieve a certain goal, most typically defeating a negatively perceived force or actor. Counter-movements are pragmatic, not dogmatic, in how they choose to engage with their enemies.

Apart from such definitional considerations, the scattered practice of ELE seems to further support this conceptual representation. A counter-movement would not necessarily offer a system of coordinated activities, a central authority, and a clear growth strategy. ELE has not really utilised its cooperative potential, as the first leaders were largely focussing on their institutions struggling with local enemies. There has never been a common campaign for advancing liberal education in Europe. And there never was a clear leader, a “Bible”, or a European centre for ELE, be it intellectual or institutional.

But even through its parallel and separate struggles, a counter-movement would also want to achieve some common goal. ELE can be convincingly portrayed as a striving for a change in higher education towards ontological/cognitive complexity, transformative pedagogy, and organisational alternative.

Furthermore, counter-movements are amorphous and often ambiguous, politically and ethically. Since they are born from an opposition to a negatively perceived phenomenon, they might attract a broad range of people with different temperaments and identifications. Over time, tensions are likely to emerge regarding the strategy for a counter-movement. Unless they are fully financially and operationally independent, members of a counter-movement find themselves in the complex game of resistance and adaptation with the conditions they are trying to change. Radicals would then cast more moderate members as revolutionaries used to cast gradual reformers, which is on a spectrum from jolly good fellows to downright traitors of the cause. Moderates would naturally see the radicals as stubborn and more obsessed with the purity of their cause than with achieving actual results. Many a counter-movement has split on such tension between the radicals and the moderates.

Counter-movements are difficult to bind in a way that is convincing to all actors and observers. Since counter-movements are likely to coalesce around the highly valued concepts with typically contested meaning, it might be impossible to draw a boundary around the counter-movement that everybody would accept. I am arguing that the eight cases studied should all be included in the counter-movement; but I also believe that the three themes identified in the thesis allow to also count most other ELE programmes. The reason for this belief lies in the fact that new ELEs typically position themselves ideologically close the pioneers to share the prestige and support enjoyed by the latter. But to confirm such a thesis,

and therefore draw a larger common boundary of an ELE countermovement, all ELE programmes would have to be studied and from multiple perspectives (one of the directions for further empirical research). Before that happens, the exact scope of a countermovement has to remain open to a debate.

Here appears the larger picture. Independently but together, the first leaders created the conditions for ELE, a space that younger learners grew in, came to inhabit, and would have to defend in the future. Future educational leaders who want to influence the future of ELE will benefit from learning about those visions they find the most congenial to their own hopes for ELE. The first leaders were exponents of 'academic courage' required to enter an uncharted territory of a new concept and a new practice. They fought despair, so prevalent in the academia, and eventually led the successful implementation of a new vision of what education could be. As such, they achieved more than had been deemed possible. And this, I shall at last argue, is another reason why ELE should be seen as a countermovement.

## CHAPTER SIX. CONCLUSION. POSSIBLE FUTURES FOR EUROPEAN LIBERAL EDUCATION

This thesis promised to answer the following question regarding ELE:

Do those programmes share some kind of vision of what a liberal education is, suggestive of some kind of pan-European movement; or, is this a series of unconnected developments alighting on a common name but sharing no kind of common vision or concept of liberal education?

In Chapter Two, I concluded that the existing sources of knowledge do not provide a common vision of ELE, or allow us to state that ELE must be a misnomer. The problem of a common vision could be seen as a research gap in two principal ways: a philosophical study of the argument or an empirical study of perceptions. I had chosen the latter as more practically urgent and feasible, also stating that this kind of meaningful snapshot of a vision might be ultimately beneficial for future philosophical reflection.

In Chapter Three, I have provided a theoretical framework for an empirical study of a vision of ELE, outlining four possible models regarding what ELE might refer to: a movement, a countermovement, core-fringes complex, or a misnomer. After that I explained the design and execution of an exploratory collective case study of the eight first leaders to answer the question of a common vision.

In Chapter Four, I presented a pre-approved, structured account of wide-ranging interviews with the first leaders in which they discussed theory, practice, and context of their visions of ELE. The concluding section offered a tabular summary of the main elements of those visions.

In Chapter Five, I presented holistic summaries of each individual vision and then analytically compared the open and hidden agreements and disagreements between them. After that I proceeded to explain how those three visions are united by the three themes of ontological complexity, transformative pedagogy, and organisational alternative. I concluded that those three themes and the way they are present in individual visions of the first leaders permit the following answer to the research question:

The three themes identified in this thesis constitute a common but mediated vision of ELE among the first leaders. This vision allows us to see ELE as a countermovement.

In this chapter, I discuss how the answer arising from this study contributes to the research on ELE. Furthermore, I elaborate the significance of the results, their limitations, and some promising areas for further research. I proceed to offer conjectures about potential

significance and possible interpretations of this answer to the philosophy of ELE, strategic dilemmas ahead of ELE, and my self-understanding as an embedded researcher.

## **6.1. CONTRIBUTION TO RESEARCH AND RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE**

### Contribution

This study contributes to higher education research by offering an alternative understanding of ELE that addresses the complex interplay of unity and diversity. The previously dominant, common sense approach to ELE assumed the existence of a common vision – a unified baseline understanding of what ELE is notwithstanding the differences in how this vision is realised. Yet, the comprehensive review of the state of knowledge did not identify such a vision. This study proposes a common vision of the eight first leaders of ELE and on this basis allows the conceptualisation of ELE as a countermovement. This countermovement arises from the heterogeneous themes of ontological complexity, transformative pedagogy, and organisational alternative. Thus, this research contributes to the scholarly reflection on ELE, provides conceptual tools for a meta-analysis of previous works on ELE, and generates a broad array of data on the pioneering examples of ELE.

The study proposes a new theory organising the existing ideological and organisational diversity of ELE into recognizable patterns. As universities are ‘unavoidably messy in its structure and culture’ (Palfreyman and Temple, 2017, p. 129), any complex idea adopted across the national boundaries is likely to produce confusing results. When one looks at ELE as a countermovement within and against the university, however, both unity and diversity can be addressed in parallel. On the one hand, the common vision of ELE challenges the dominant ways of perceiving knowledge, teaching students, and organising internal processes of higher education institutions. On the other hand, this common vision does not deny the diversity of local conditions and often fundamental differences between individual visions of ELE. The idea of a countermovement leads us to the threshold of evaluating to what extent the common vision for ELE is actually reflected across its many functions and locales.

The divergence of claims about the features and functions of ELE made in the scholarly literature can now also be addressed from a new perspective. The divergent elucidations of ELE identified across the conceptual, empirical, and advocacy works to date,<sup>155</sup> do not amount to a heuristic structuring some, most, or all of the claims raised in the past. But the themes of the countermovement identified in this thesis propose such a heuristic and a common vision.

<sup>155</sup> More recently, the theory of liberal education outside the US was seen more as a problem. ‘The differences in substance and structure call into question the elasticity of the definition and the actual nature of the phenomenon’ (Boyle 2019).

This allows me to submit that the countermovement proposal makes the observable diversity of the theory and practice of ELE more understandable. Higher education research has now better tools to conduct a critical literature review of liberal education in Europe and beyond.

Finally, this study produced an extensive dataset on the influential visions of the first leaders which had not been recorded or reported beforehand. Results chapters (4.1-4.8) provide a structured account of the theory, practice, and – to a lesser extent – the context of each vision of ELE as held by the ‘founding fathers’. The data is of fundamental relevance to various strands of research on ELE and can add to some other lines of higher education research.

This contribution will now be specified by addressing the four limitations of this answer concerning the generalisability, design of the study, conditions of its execution, and new questions which arose during this research.

### Generalisability of the results

The first limitation concerns whether the common vision of the first leaders applies to the broader ELE population. The design of this study does not allow such conclusion, even though it does not rule out the possibility either. The claim is that liberal education, as envisioned by the eight leaders, can be seen as a countermovement. To generalise the results, a more diverse sample of ELEs would have to be studied, for example, one including Christian ELEs (Chavagnes Studium and International Theological Institute), great books programmes (Gothenburg and Navarra), or ‘arts and sciences’ ELEs (Twente, UCL BAsC). Equally interesting are nominally liberal arts programmes which do not offer courses in humanities (one pathway at Birmingham, Venlo in general), ELE programmes with signature pedagogies such as problem-based learning (Rotterdam, Maastricht, Warwick), or robust ELEs with established position but not the first in the country (Freiburg, Lüneburg, Kings College, Dublin). Additionally, ELEs with core curricula (25% while at least 40% in the population), previously excluded and unavailable programs<sup>156</sup> may have affected the results of the study.

With regards to research design, this exploratory study was purposefully limited in terms of time, space, data, and angle (see Chapter Three). Three potentially relevant questions were therefore not addressed:

- the relation to the forms of liberal education tradition that were not studied,
- the degree to which individual visions were implemented, and

<sup>156</sup> Vesalius College in Brussels was briefly considered as one potential site, until it was ruled out a 1B institution.

- the reasons why the visions look as they do.

Each question points towards historical, empirical, and theoretical perspectives warranting further study.

#### Further comparative research on liberal education

The comparative questions are concerned with the specificity of ELE versus other forms of liberal arts education. Areas of comparison include the (universalised) past of liberal education, current American practices, and other cultural traditions that have recently been claimed to be versions of liberal education. The eclectic social reality of ELE could be studied through a range of methods and theories, such as multi-sited ethnography, actor network theory, historical methods, or critical discourse analysis. Possible comparisons can be classified into diachronic and synchronic.

Regarding the heritage forms of liberal education, the main result of this study – ELE as a countermovement based on the three themes – can now be contrasted with the past forms or ideas of liberal education. The historical analysis can reveal which elements of the idea of liberal education were retained, dropped, and created. It is possible to compare the three themes of ELE with the six themes of ‘the living arts’ proposed by Rothblatt, or with the two traditions and the two accommodations proposed by Kimball (both discussed in section 2.1). History of ideas can also focus on the presence or absence of past figures, books, and models of Anglo-Saxon liberal education over the last two centuries. Lastly, a countermovement might be seen as a new articulation of the same old tradition or, alternatively, as a new approach mediated by the recent developments of the research university model.<sup>157</sup>

Counterfactual history is another productive avenue for future research. The conclusion of this study highlights the suspicious absence of some popular ideas associated with liberal arts education. For example, the three themes as well as the open and hidden agreements between the eight leaders do not include critical thinking, the collegiate ideal and a collegial organisation, the Great Books tradition, breadth of learning, or the ‘gift of an interval’ (Oakeshott, 2004, p. 28). Similarly, the liberal arts education does not seem universally

<sup>157</sup> One could, for example, claim that ontological complexity, transformative pedagogy, and organisational alternative, are simply an attempt to systematize the Socratic method of (liberal education). This approach could also be compared to the Nietzschean vision of (liberal) education and ways of using history. Or one could examine to what extent this reconstructed vision relates to the understanding of liberal education as a general education in a free society’, in the words of the famous 1945 Harvard report. Interestingly, all three possible comparisons would arguably fall into the philosophical tradition of liberal education and were, at least in the first period of adoption, more often extolled in theory than practised in educational institutions.

concerned with the study of “the Good, the True, and the Beautiful”. This appears to be a new chapter in the history of liberal arts education.

Synchronic comparison concerns the relation of ELE and the state of the liberal education in the US. Two possible starting points for this include the ‘overlapping pragmatic consensus’, as proposed by Kimball and Paris (2000), and the declining distinctiveness and recognition of liberal education, which arises from the large-scale study by Gardner (2016). ELE can now also be analysed through the lens of decoupling a liberal arts college (structure) and liberal education as an approach to education (idea). This development in American liberal arts education, evident in the higher education landscape after the Culture Wars, produced a broad range of adaptations. This amounts to widespread disorientation concerning the core of the concept and how liberal education is different from education *tout court* (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012; Baker et al., 2012). Such diversity extends back to at least the post-1960s experimentation with a range of telic and popular reforms reinvigorating the historic pluralism of American liberal education (Grant and Riesman, 1978). Liberal education as a countermovement lays the groundwork for those and other theorisations of the state of liberal education in the US.

As liberal education emerges outside of the Western world, new opportunities for productive comparison arise. Researchers and advocates proposed indigenous roots of the idea of liberal arts education in India, China, and elsewhere (see section 2.3.3). Similarly to the European countermovement, global liberal educators have a great deal to overcome and might engage various cultural tropes and educational theories to ‘sell the liberal arts’. The three themes can be compared to the individual and regional visions for liberal education elsewhere in the world. Such ‘other’ visions can be examined in the light of different conditions that can both enrich and limit them.

Another line of comparison includes philosophical treaties on liberal education, such as the works by Arcilla, Bloom, Delbanco, DeNicola, or Nussbaum. Philosophers provide elucidations on the nature of liberal education, which can be compared to the vision presented here. This exercise illuminates the missing values or dimensions of liberal arts.

#### Further evaluative research on ELE

The present study is founded upon two important assumptions: (!) that the vision of the first leader is important for the way the institution operates, for example, that first leader can be considered a ‘fashion setter’ (Abrahamson, 1996), and (2) that the first programme affects the positioning of subsequent institutionalisations of ELE in their context. However, the study does not evaluate to what degree these original visions are implemented. This calls for more

research on the teachers, students, institutional communication, future leaders, and a whole range of external stakeholders of ELE.

ELE faculty offer the first and potentially the most important category of evaluation, because they deliver liberal education to students and affect their perception of the idea. Importantly, in European conditions, ELE faculty are unlikely to have experienced a 'named' liberal education themselves. The transfer of the first leader's vision to ELE faculty offers a fascinating angle for the study of ELE.

The same question can also be posed to students. Apart from the several short narratives on how students understand their liberal education (Dirksen et al., 2017), an ongoing larger scale investigation by Teun Dekker focusses on the questions of how students perceive liberal education and whether it is an important category for them.

An individual vision of ELE can be analysed from the perspective of organisational self-understanding and communicative strategy. The initial review of aims, principles, and values (Appendix 3) has proven that the website descriptions of ELE differ from the results of an in-case analyses of the intentions of the first leaders (5.1). The rhetorical and substantive rules of marketing can result in ELEs underplaying the initial vision and focussing more on the buy-in for prospective students (Telling, 2018). Programmes actively reframe themselves as an attractive choice of study and attempt to underline their unique selling point. Finally, there is a question whether the labour market and graduate schools are aware of ELE, and if so, whether they share the vision of ELE outlined here.<sup>158</sup>

Future evaluative studies cannot ignore the issue of leadership transition. The originators were often charismatic leaders, which for organisational reasons are unlikely to be replaced by another visionary, and yet the continuation in leadership might not be enough to keep ELE alive given the unfavourable conditions. Furthermore, the leadership change can have a hostile character, or the circumstances of the creation can radically change. This cannot but result in the disconnection between the original vision and institutional practice.

Evaluative studies require consulting multiple sources of data and, most likely, a collaborative study design. It is not possible to evaluate the degree of implementation from afar. Therefore, this line of research into the vision of ELE requires participants who are immersed in the programmes and aware of the broader structural considerations. Researchers can study how

<sup>158</sup> The Netherlands seem to be the only country in which a survey study of LAS graduates was conducted to assess their position on those two plains (*Liberal Arts & Sciences Programmes Alumni Survey Factsheet 2017, 2018*), but it relied on the perceptions of alumni themselves, not the gatekeepers.

this common vision is perceived, internalised, and transformed by different actors and at different levels. They can also address how those practices change over time.

#### Further explanatory research on ELE

This exploratory study provides the first systematic approximation of the 'what' of the common vision of ELE. It does not, however, comprehensively account for the interrelated questions of 'how' and 'why'. Multiple factors affect the creation and survival of educational programmes. To that end, the narratives of the leaders should be confirmed and complemented by other influential actors and factors. This study identifies US-based mediators, for example The Endeavor Foundation or Bard College.<sup>159</sup> The mediators shaped ELE but were never systematically studied for their motivation or impact. Furthermore, while some of the first leaders communicated with each other, some others benefitted from the mediating organisations aiming to spread liberal education in Europe, such as 'Artes Liberales' Association (1996-2001) or later ECOLAS.

A related set of problems concerns the historical, cultural, institutional, and structural embeddedness of individual visions. Without a common tradition and system of higher education, ELE arises from divergent landscapes of disagreements about the purposes of the university. A discussion of ELE can be furthered by addressing the systemic role of high school education (considering the general education of ELE as repetitive) and by perceiving a student as either a child (Anglo-Saxon) or as an adult (continental tradition). The organisation and funding of a higher education system also matters, as does the balance of power that affects the chances of survival of ELE. Another line of research concerns the limited reactions of the professions and disciplines to ELE which did not really perceive ELE as a credible threat to their hegemony.

Higher education researchers portrayed ELE against the backdrop of broader global trends. The factors supporting ELE included: internationalization and American hegemony, transferable skills for knowledge economies, and massification creating the demand for quality higher education. The restraining factors included research-based power structures, rankings supporting institutional isomorphism, and the ambiguous impact of framing education as a private good (Altbach et al., 2009; Jemielniak and Greenwood, 2015; Teichler, 2007). At the regional level, the development of ELE in Western and Eastern Europe was discussed separately (see Chapter Two). Future research will examine those narratives in connection to the results of studies on ELE and the proposed reconstruction of the vision for ELE.

<sup>159</sup> An account of how those organisations perceived their role, can be found in: (Kidd and Kidd, 2002) and (Becker and Gillespie, 2017).

The structural and institutional context undoubtedly affects ELE but does not determine its nature. Further research is required to connect data from the micro level with factors established at the meso and macro level. This will deepen the understanding of both static and dynamic aspects of ELE.

#### Practical influences on the research execution

Qualitative research does not offer full control over the conditions of data collection. Some of the first leaders dedicated more time than others to the interviews, authorising their sections, and answering the additional email questions. That partially explains why some visions might appear more robust than others. With one exception, the interviews were conducted in English – the native language of only one participant. The visions produced can be classified as highly contextual: While this allowed for more hermeneutical analysis of ELE, it nevertheless hindered the possibility of a thematic analysis of data that could have been more systematic and transparent.

The results suggest that the visions of the first leaders are more coherent than the conceptualisations of liberal education in analytical works. The deductive-inductive coding framework used in the empirical part of the study (Chapter Three) provides a partial explanation, as specific categories of comparison were built from the interview data within the main research interests which warranted a significant degree of overlap. The analysis of the features and functions of ELE (section 2.2) followed the inductive logic, as it was designed to identify a common understanding of ELE and only revealed granular differences in the process. It is possible, however, to imagine a reversed relation between uniformity and diversity: Themes and trends emerge from the growing body of the literature, whereas the holistic analysis of the leaders' visions presents them in a more idiosyncratic way. The pragmatist ontology of this study permits this ambiguity; without making claims about the inherent nature of the reality, the study only claims to provide an approximation driven by the interests and abilities of the researcher. In other words, if this study had a different research question, sample, or moment of execution, both the results and the ultimate answer might have been different. While I fact-checked every suspicious or overgeneralised claim during the authorisation process, I was not in a position to completely attest to the veracity of the leaders' visions. After all, interviews about the past offer 'a bridge, not a time machine' (Spencer, 2005, p. 5); the natural complement to this study would be a historical account of the origins and the conditions in which ELEs appeared.

I had no reason to question the first leaders' motivations, especially since they knew their account of the vision of ELE would become open for public scrutiny. My role was to help them

reflect, with the added benefit of hindsight, on what they had done, and present the results to the scholarly audience. I also presented this study as a work-in-progress to various scholarly audiences over the last three years of this research and revised my thinking based on those discussions.<sup>160</sup>

#### New questions arising from this research

The study identified a range of questions of crucial importance for the better understanding of ELE, first and foremost related to the varying size and integration of ELE in different countries and at the European level. Some of the visions were idiosyncratic developments, others had a clearer ambition to found a model or even create a subsector of higher education dedicated to the liberal education. Researchers need to estimate the size of ELE in each country, in relation to the student and programmatic base, and the degree to which ELE is accepted and influential in various contexts. The study of legal and institutional environments of ELE is particularly salient at this stage.

Secondly, while survival alone might be counted as success, some programmes were clearly more successful in leaving their mark on the larger higher education system. ELE has not become a norm anywhere in Europe. Yet a small programme like BISLA in Slovakia is clearly different than the university college model in the Netherlands, where liberal arts and sciences became the sixth most popular undergraduate degree (Hoogendoorn, 2019). This study calls for an investigation of the difficult balance between 'isomorphism (imitation) and polymorphism (innovation)' (Fumasoli et al., 2014, p. 23) in each ELE, including how it might be changing over time. As the ELE sector continues to grow, the diffusion of liberal education can be either mimetic, responding to the common pressures of the market (Boyle, 2019), or normative, based on some vision of liberal education.

The analysis of the demographic, socio-cultural, and educational background of students as well as alumni trajectories is also in order. Such an analysis should investigate broadly what types of candidates know about ELE, apply, and are offered admission. It would also be important to know what other options ELE students had been considering, which professional and educational careers they enter, and how a particular programme contributed to it.

<sup>160</sup> I eventually managed to meet with Jan Sokol in May 2019. Sokol was the first of first leaders (his Institute of Fundamental Learning at Charles University in Prague dates back to 1989 and was the first ELE called as such by Darvas in 1995). He applauded the countermovement answer and the three themes as applicable to his vision as well, even though they were results of analysis that did not include his vision as a case.

The existing state of the knowledge would greatly be enhanced if there were more documentary materials available. For example, websites of the programmes tend to be updated to reflect the current interests of the institution, and as such rarely document historical developments. Curricular documents are often difficult to access, and languages erect further barriers between the programmes and those who wish to study ELE. Moreover, most of the case studies on ELE have been composed by people involved in the administration of said programmes. Access to documents could upend many of the claims about ELE in the literature.

Not all forms of ELE were successful.<sup>161</sup> The study of failed attempts to create ELE can illuminate the role of the structural factors, personality traits of the leader, windows of historical opportunity, as well as luck.

Lastly, the study began from an interest in ELE as a seemingly incoherent educational concept or theory. That might, however, be the nature or practice of any education: after all, concepts like 'university' or 'interdisciplinarity' can seem equally multi-faceted or confused.

## **6.2. SIGNIFICANCE FOR PHILOSOPHY OF LIBERAL EDUCATION**

In order to contextualise my contribution, I now return to the philosophical question of ontologies of ELE posed in section 2.4.2. The answer to the research question – that ELE can be seen as a countermovement – has now been defended as a contribution to the empirical research. My argument here is that, depending on an ontological positions one holds, this answer could be interpreted in diverse, or even contradictory ways.

Essentialism was concerned about the graspable essence of a perhaps more shape-shifting spirit of liberal arts. Radical or universalist essentialism might assume that liberal education was, is, and will be one idea. Therefore, whether ELE studied in this research meaningfully converges about anything matters little compared to the question which of the studied examples represent the true essence or a spirit of liberal education. Perhaps some, all, or neither. The only way to prove that a common vision reconstructed should be seen as liberal education would be to prove that it is of common essence with what liberal education has always been.

A moderate or contemporary essentialism would seek to establish a standard or a set of principles of liberal education that all of its legitimate manifestations would adhere to. This

<sup>161</sup> See (Godwin, 2015a) for a discussion of the complicity liberal education in neoliberal narratives and potential counter-narratives.

standard can be proclaimed by one actor, an organisation, influential leader, or a researcher; or they could possibly be created through a deliberative search process in the community. In either case, the result is likely going to mean drawing a line between the 'true' and 'false' ELEs, in the sense that some of those who might wish to call themselves liberal education would be denied this as they are simply mistaken, or worse. From a moderate essentialist perspective, countermovement is insufficient, because it does not turn the themes into a more coherent intellectual proposition that would allow for a determination if something is ELE; it probably should become a movement.

A relativist reading of the answer of this study might engage with the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' looking for the hidden meanings in the sudden re-emergence of ELE. Rather than believe in what the first leaders, or others, declare about ELE, we should turn our attention to the practice of declaring something to be ELE and consider what types of ELE are getting ahead of the others, and what is the function of the countermovement as a whole. The answer might deal with the prestigious historical and transatlantic connection, the pressure on constant innovation in the educational field, the need for a leader to present herself as useful to the organisation which employs them, the conditions of competition for talented students etc. The ideology of ELE, as reconstructed here, is secondary to those real forces at play. Perhaps ELE is not a countermovement in itself, but it is me – the author of this study – trying to present it as such to achieve some valuable goal.

Agnostic or self-descriptive relativism might also say that the three themes presented here are irrelevant because they cannot be used to prevent other programmes from calling themselves ELE and therefore expanding the scope of the phenomenon. Those who discuss ELE at length, but do not state how they have settled on a particular list of included programmes, were probably right: programmes construct the meaning in divergent manner anyway. This research has proved that an overarching interpretation of divergent cases can be made, but this is a statement about the researcher's abilities more than the nature of reality.

From a pragmatist perspective, the three broad themes and a general, heterogenous nature of the countermovement might allow the researchers to make qualified and negative statements about ELE rather than clear, positive generalisations. But if another set of institutions was sampled, the common themes and the nature of cooperation would likely be different. And this flexibility is not a bad thing. As a countermovement, or as a broad undefined movement, ELE could achieve more; and on the other hand, ignoring fundamental distinctions can keep more programmes at the table for the mutual benefit of the movement.<sup>162</sup> ELE is as big and as

<sup>162</sup> This might be because actors are 'focused on a common concert and [act] on the basis of a minimal working consensus' (Nadai and Maeder, 2005).

undefined as it is useful for collective action; it is not however clear how to deal with the border conflicts and hierarchies inside. The most important part of the analysis in this study is not whether or not ELE is a countermovement, but what the leaders and programmes have in common (open and hidden agreements) and what common function they perform in the context of higher education.

A pluralist reading of those results could say that what matters is that even without this overarching interpretation presented here people had already been willing to use the concept to advance a valuable educational goal they have held dear. The consensus reconstructed in this study is either generic or dangerous, as adhering to it would extinguish the dialectical or multilateral engine of progress for ELE as a (counter)movement. The most important parts of the analysis are the open and hidden disagreements between the programmes as they reveal the inflection points where the meaning of ELE is created, and even more importantly, the in-case analysis of the complexity and dedication driving each vision of ELE.

In an agonistic interpretation of pluralism, the problem with ELE today is that it lacks this kind of intellectual fire. People disagree about the ideas when they truly care about them. Even more so, from the oppositions often new qualities emerge, when new figures try to overcome the opposition. Agonistic pluralism would welcome the aggressive-defensive (or relational, political) uses of ELE, actively contesting the understanding of the other side(s) while one advances its own positive interpretation. If Europe has no Bloom and Rorty advancing their own interpretations of ELE while acknowledging and rejecting that of the opponent, it would not have its Nussbaum either.

A more peaceful pluralism would reject the debilitating opposition of the culture wars in favour of more peaceful or disinterested pluralism. This might be rooted in John Stuart Mill's observation that education is a multi-sided object,<sup>163</sup> one rooted in what we share as human beings and expressive of our freedom. For those reasons, it would be absurd to expect that its full potential could be realised in one institution or one coherent vision. Multiple interpretations of ELE can productively co-exist, contributing to the dialogue and our understanding of the topic without either disavowing alternative interpretations or abandoning any boundary between the legitimate and illegitimate use of the concept.

Lastly, a systems thinking approach would be most interested in how those individual visions have grown in their diverse niches, and whether the framework of a countermovement is

<sup>163</sup> 'Education, in its larger sense, is one of the most inexhaustible of all topics. (...) is one of the subjects which most essentially to be considered by various minds, and from a variety of points of view. For, of all many-sided subjects, it is the one which has the greatest number of sides' (Mill, 1867).

enough for ELE to challenge the larger higher education system to which it is positioned as an outlier. In practice this would mean that while pragmatism might disregard for example great books programs as marginal phenomenon for ELE, systems thinking would pay much attention to them as an interesting case of survival against the odds – and therefore a potential for a change in the larger system. Since a common ELE branding suggest a commonality and clarity that contextualised practices rarely reflect, one should be very careful about projecting an overarching unity through some coherent abstraction. The empirical work remains to be done in understanding how those ideological representations of resistance stand up to the reality.

Making an ontological interpretation is a point at which the descriptive ambition of this study cedes the way to a normative determination of meaning. Furthermore, there is a real possibility that there might exist more than those five ontologies of viewing ELE. The five presented here are, I would argue, all plausible interpretations that suffice to show the variance of reactions to the results of this research.

The problem can be pursued even further if we were to consider possible roles of those ontological outlooks or lenses. The interpretation of ontology presented above assumes that one of the ontologies better understand the nature of ELE revealed in this study. Another interpretation would be to treat all of them as possible heuristics that add to the complex picture arising from this research.

But ontology can also be used as a personal lens, if one claimed that one of those ontologies better explains how a leader or a programme views ELE to be. Further option is that at certain moments a programme under study could be better described with one of those lenses than others.

Finally, there is a reflexivity issue that would explore whether one of the ontologies have structured how I saw the problem and what were my models. This study was not consciously written from the perspective of any particular ontology: in fact, the ontologies have arisen about mid-way through the study when I started comparing the transcripts, especially the opinions on other programmes and strategic decisions regarding ELE. At various points of this research, I have been close to different of those perspectives, without committing to one from the start. But this does not mean that ontologies did not influence the result in other ways. I will return to this question in the Afterword.

### 6.3. SIGNIFICANCE FOR POLITICS AND PRACTICE

The second potential significance of the results of this study is for the politics and practice of ELE. The ELE is already relevant beyond its size, as it imagines and creates an alternative to the status quo of cognitively siloed, organisationally rigid, and pedagogically authoritarian higher education. And as the original situation begins to change, internal and external actors shaping ELE today and tomorrow can benefit from the understanding advanced in this thesis to determine their reaction to the arising dilemma. This dilemma seems to be related to the question of a boundary or a definition of ELE.

This study started by noting that on the one hand, there seems to be a phenomenon that people call their developments ELE, yet on the other hand, it is not clear what all of those programmes have substantially in common, or what common vision do they subscribe to. The question now is how the results of this study, interpreted through ontologies, claim what needs to be done with the definition of ELE. On the one hand, there might be those who do not see a need for any change; others might read the results of this study as supportive of either a more defined or a less defined approach to ELE than currently is the case.

#### Strategy one: nothing changes

For quite some time, ELE was rightly seen as a new development. As a countermovement, it was still at a slightly anarchic starting point of the period of 'educational upheaval' (Grant and Riesman, 1978, p. 188). It was not clear how many of the new developments would survive the initial moment of enthusiasm, how would the environment react to the newcomers, and what types of experimenting turn out to be productive or otherwise helpful. Kimball and Rothblatt saw pluralism in how liberal education was developing over time; ELE seemed to be a scene in which this pluralism was developed all at once.

During this phase, most of the leaders and people otherwise involved in ELE were dedicating much more of their attention bandwidth to running their programmes, helping them grow, securing their long-time well-being. With the dominance of self-description, ELE was whatever people claimed it to be; external audiences were interested in ELE because it was new and challenging the status quo, not because of its philosophical coherence. The question of a boundary of such a new phenomenon, and the type of an academic debate this study seeks to advance, could rightly have been seen as superfluous or dangerous.

From this perspective, there does not seem to be a need for any change in the existing undefined notion of ELE, which seems congruent with the countermovement of the first leaders. After all, ELE grew under those conditions and continues to grow until this day. While

it might be getting more confusing from the outside with the new programmes opening their doors with sometimes original interpretations of the core idea, the inclusiveness has produced a range of heartening developments, among other things the emergence of a liberal education student conferences and related events since 2016. While there certainly are hiccups, as one or two small programmes are closing every year, they should not distract us from the overall trend in which ELE affects a growing number of students and new relevant programmes are being created. The benefit of this strategy is assumed to be more of the same in the future.

Yet the same benefit might be interpreted as a shortcoming by those who take a more impatient stance towards the growth of ELE or point towards its uneven rate. Eastern Europe, for example, has seen only two new ELE programmes being opened in almost a generation, and both of them on the basis of much older creations. Many existing programmes often change towards a less direct embrace of the concept of liberal education, in curriculum, communication, or both. This might suggest that the idea is no longer fresh, and for some reason less attractive. Furthermore, the issue of abuses of the definition of ELE is now becoming a matter of accreditation and regulation since some institutions are already judged to have abused the name by the accreditation panels. Finally, the reach of ELE message seems limited, especially given almost three decades of developments, almost a hundred programs, over 15.000 alumni and ca. 4000-5000 new candidates starting every year. The confused or fuzzy definition might be the factor that undermines the attractiveness and prospects of ELE.

This research did not produce an authoritative position to determine which of those arguments is more convincing. But since the disciplinary university education ELE is countering seems unlikely to disintegrate anytime soon, there is a real possibility that the current 'constructive ambiguity' might not be a winning strategy for ELE. To explore this possibility, I would like to present a dilemma related to how the boundary and definition of ELE might be changed.

Those who might argue for a change might raise the perceived need to bring some coherence to LE in Europe by declaring what the 'true' programmes have in common; the words 'constitution' and 'manifestoes' have been floating in the vicinity of ELE since at least 2016. In the Netherlands, UCDN have made an attempt to declare what a university college is in 2015 (University College Deans Network, 2014). In a way that was ELE being a victim of its own success; as more institutions claimed the by then prestigious name of a university college for some new developments that had a very loose connection to the guiding idea, deans of the 'original' university colleges have joined forces to protect the brand. A similar attempt was proposed, but yet not acted upon, in the UK around the LAS+ group; and according to Abrahám (personal communication, 2019), ECOLAS is working on the manifesto about the role

of Liberal Arts in the bachelor’s level that would be directed to the policy makers as much as to the ELE community.

In light of seeing ELE as a countermovement, such desire to reduce the ambiguity is rather understandable. A move from the dominant negative identification through what ELE rejects towards some positive vision based on the clear features or functions would mean a transformation into a movement proper. At the individual level, retiring first leaders might want to pass on the future ones some form of clear guidelines about what ELE is.

The results of this study show the difficulty of such task. The existing visions are different, and the common vision reconstructed here is too abstract to be attractive from a communicational or political point of view. ELE currently has some porous, non-dogmatic boundaries, and not all members of a countermovement might agree with the proposed strategy. As the ambiguous self-definition of ELE no longer seems tenable, attempts to bring coherence into the countermovement will grow in strength. Yet the qualities of the countermovement do not lead to one obvious solution. If ELE was to change, I propose the following strategic choice: either to define what ‘true’ ELE is or to drop the term entirely. I will call those options *the amplifying strategy* and *the dispersion strategy*, to be enacted at the level of a country or across Europe. The benefits and threats of each strategy are summarized in the Table 10 below.

*Table 10. Benefits and threats of strategic choice regarding the definition of ELE*

|          | We should define what is ‘true’ LE                            | We should not define what is ‘true’ LE  |
|----------|---|---|
| Benefits | Communication / branding/ reach<br>Promotion of the true ones | Easier outreach to those who share all but a name<br>Internal inspiration for creative combinations |
| Threats  | Stifling creativity<br>Power play                             | All things to all people<br>No tools to counter neoliberal mutations, for example                   |

Strategy two: conceptual amplification

The first strategy proposes doubling down on the importance of the concept of liberal education. It defines the problem along the lines of genuine and false examples of the ELE branding.<sup>164</sup> Then it proposes to create a dense, intensive debate that would effectively leave inside only programmes and individuals who seriously contribute to some distinctive

<sup>164</sup> This reading is strikingly similar to a situation of American Universities abroad, which were said to struggle with building its common brand because they already were different. ‘Maintaining a united front against charlatans has been complicated by institutional diversity among the genuine’ (Long, 2018).

understandings or competing interpretations of the concept. In short, it means settling down on some definition of liberal education.

I think that this strategy would make ELE an essentialist or a pluralist phenomenon. In the first instance, a set of criteria will have to be imposed and forms of ELE will be assessed according to those criteria to determine which of them represent true version of liberal education. A pluralist interpretation would abstain on the criteria but nevertheless set some kind of a boundary within which a debate on the meaning of ELE is helpful, and beyond which the concept becomes abused. In either case the working definition of liberal education could either be imposed by some source of authority or could be the result of the conversations within a countermovement. To boost legitimacy, it is likely that this strategy would in some sense go 'back to the core' (Cohen de Lara and Drop, 2017) and seek to ground some of its core principles in the unity of recognized, paradigmatic past examples of liberal education.<sup>165</sup> Programmes deemed to be impostors will find themselves in a very ambiguous position.

This strategy is probably easier to enact as philosophy than as a consistent communication to an external audience. Philosophical accounts of liberal education operate at a level of abstraction that lends itself to drawing a boundary without sounding too rigid;<sup>166</sup> W.B. Gallie referred to this quality as an open achievement. But this ambiguity is exactly what makes many audiences impatient with philosophy, so it is most likely that to be successful, the amplifying strategy would result in some form of a short definition or a set of constitutive features of ELE, thus skewing towards essentialism.

One obvious benefit of adopting this strategy would be communicative. The confusing picture of ELE would, over time, give way to a coherent definition that can be effectively presented and promoted to a range of audiences. At a time where the liberal education is becoming less defined globally, Europe would offer some consistent narrative about what it is. This narrative can be used to convince more institutions to offer ELE, and more students to consider it.

The associated threat is that the creativity about ELE would be effectively stifled. Having defined what ELE is, the countermovement would present the boundary cases with an ultimatum between isomorphism and exclusion. And once ELE became essentialised, the likely

<sup>165</sup> If ELE was additionally seen as a contested concept (Gallie, 1956), wherein the 'standard, general use of the concept' is to dispute and contest its meaning, the core principles of ELE might be said to be housed in some exemplar of ELE – a universally accepted one or one appropriated by only one tradition. The question then would be whether the myth of difference and opposition, as connected to the countermovement interpretation proposed in this study, could be seen as such relational exemplar?

<sup>166</sup> The following passage offers an example: '[It is] the heart of what we call liberal arts, which are efforts at critical and self-conscious interpretation aimed at understanding who we are, how we exist, and how we might live in the world we inhabit. As knowledge-based approaches to estimate and comprehend the human condition, the liberal arts deploy a wide range of methods, from hermeneutics to science' (Katznelson, 2018, p. 13).

next step will be the introduction of rankings measure the excellence of existing ELE programmes in either achieving some desirable goals. Alternatively, ELE programmes might build hierarchies according to the age, prestige, or purity of its vision.

Still, the amplifying strategy offers an added benefit of defending the true manifestations of ELE against the pretenders. Invested with collective authority, representatives of ELE could declare some of the programmes to be abusing the label and perhaps pressure them to reconsider their self-description. This would benefit the true programmes since students who might otherwise seek ELE in the pretending institutions would be informed about where they are more likely to receive the education they were seeking.

The question of a power play in establishing and sustaining the common definition of ELE cannot be avoided. More numerous, prestigious, financially strong, larger, or otherwise influential models of ELE would be in a preferred position to influence the outcome of the process of determination. Given the existing diversity of forms of ELE, it is not clear how one could ensure a fair process or efficient execution without establishing an accrediting agency for ELE. A creation of such a body is likely to remain a point of contention.

### Strategy three: conceptual dispersion

An alternative strategy believes the label of liberal education is already dead and should be dropped. If the term is close to becoming a misnomer, it plays no effective role in the communication, and thus the logical decision is to phase it out of use. The dispersion strategy is founded upon a statement that the goals of liberal education can best be served if we stopped calling it liberal education.

In this strategy, liberal education matters not because of the prestige of the name, but because of its perpetual promise, and it is the latter that has to be extolled as the value of ELE. Some administrators of ELE programmes can describe them without the label, for many students, the concept is neither a central feature of ELE nor the primary attractor; and the faculty would appreciate more the resources of hope liberal education was denoting in the age of massification and marketisation than any particular label used by their institution. Perhaps it is not the name or the concept that in the end matters.

One could replace the term with a consideration on what makes us human beings,<sup>167</sup> the shared desire of expressing freedom and transcending boundaries; polymathy (Gombrich, 2016); education as sense-making through a series of personalised engagements; or lastly by

<sup>167</sup> 'Our shared vulnerability and imperfection nurtures and sustains our unique capacity for compassion. (...) It is a theme of a liberal education' (Harward, 2018, p. 17).

the enhanced understanding of the greater purposes of higher education,<sup>168</sup> among others. Abandoning the ‘the magic phrase “liberal arts”’ (Gloyn, 2011), would allow liberal educators to speak instead in a more accessible and more widely convincing language of educating for the full life beyond the job, integration of the divided personality, an undogmatic, informal way of learning, the human element in bureaucratic structures of learning, active teaching etc. In the day to day communication, the confused label would be replaced by clear, actionable (policy) proposals.

At a more conceptual level, ELE can be repackaged as a (set of models for) a telic reform. The term, originally proposed by Grant and Riesman (1978) to distinguish reforms in US higher education of 1970s that questioned the role (assigned by the evolving societal contract) to the universities (preparing for jobs or further training), means reforms that instead proposed a ‘distinctive set of ends or purposes’ (1978, p. 2). Telic reforms were serious, typically were led by a charismatic leader who instead of lowering expectations for learning, charted new directions for what higher education should be about. Although small, telic reforms had considerable influence on higher education, affecting the debate by its daring proposals and associated ideals (neoclassical, aesthetic-expressive, communal-expressive, activist-radical). They promoted pure (non-bureaucratized) learning in a community, driven by egalitarian spirit, sense of mission/vocation, dedication to teaching, assessment by ideals (not tests), transdisciplinary or interdisciplinary learning;<sup>169</sup> undergraduate socialisation as the primary function of a college; the emancipation of the undergraduate as a phase in its own right, and preparing students to become critics or intellectuals (1978, pp. 33–37). Those proposals are arguably also the goals of liberal education, but Grant and Riesman do not term them such. In fact, some ‘popular reform’ proposals – for example abolishing academic departments,<sup>170</sup> or increasing student choice – are connected to the ideal of liberal education as well.

An obvious shortcoming of the dispersion strategy is that it abandons the prestigious connection to the liberal arts tradition.<sup>171</sup> While the latter is arguably problematic anyway, either confusing or alienating (portrayed as impractical or elitist), few of the programmes once positioning itself as liberal education have chosen to stop doing so entirely. The work to build

<sup>168</sup> See for example conceptualising education as constituted by qualification, socialisation, and subjectification (Biesta, 2009), or higher education as having four distinctive dimensions and aims: learning and discovery, well-being, civic purpose, and the meaningful life (Harward, 2016).

<sup>169</sup> Additionally, in the neoclassical version, ‘substituting fundamental books for departments and elementary skills for disciplines’ (Brann, 1975, p. 9).

<sup>170</sup> Organisational reforms towards restoring the collegiate, unified organisation, were actually promoted by both ‘telic’ and ‘popular’ reformers in the US.

<sup>171</sup> Another shortcoming might be whether this ‘no logo’ strategy of Grant and Riesman did actually work in generating a policy matching even their ‘modest proposal’ – but then again, the Harvard Red Book was as famous as it was ignored even by Harvard itself.

the attractiveness for any new concept would have to start from scratch, which might put ELE at a competitive disadvantage against other forms of liberal education globally.

On the other hand, abandoning the label would open ELE to new alliances. One could wonder if there might be programmes who share all or most of the goals or means of ELE, but not the name, and as such today seem as either competing or irrelevant. Some of those might also be countermovements against the disciplinary research university and from a strategic point of view, it would only make sense to join forces with them in a common cause of a higher education reform. A name might be a small price to pay for having your vision implemented.

Another threat is that without the anchor of a common concept, ELE could quickly become all things to all people. The current volatility would only increase if we choose to focus on goals or policies instead of the core concepts. Specifically, without an anchor in the tradition and paradigm examples, ELE will be more subject to the pressure from the currently influential higher education trends, especially the neoliberal co-optations of the goals of university education, among others.

But even so, by dropping the term, the dispersion strategy can boost internal inspiration for more creative combinations of the concepts associated with ELE in the past and the new forms which might arise in the future. This in itself can serve as a source of rejuvenation and boost the attractiveness of the countermovement for multiple actors, but especially for the future leaders who could experience even greater freedom than the first leaders described in this study.

This boundary or definitional dilemma is not limited to Europe: the theory and the boundary of liberal education is continuously tested in the US, while global liberal education challenges the Western origins of the concept and raises the question of who gets to define the parameters of the debate. New definitional challenges would arise from the de-politicised approaches to liberal education as reflective of non-Western values.

The choice of a strategy will be contentious: It relies on the evidence or vision, the ontological assumptions about ELE, as well as on a reflexive stance towards the latter. A matrix of the strategies and ontologies should reveal the benefits and threats for various actors, which goes beyond the remit of this study. Short of advocating a solution, the consideration of strategic options for ELE informed by this research nevertheless deepens the understanding of the problem and the stakes. Without a prescriptive, abstract, pan-European vision, the question is if such a vision could exist in the future and, if considered desirable, how to make it happen.

## AFTERWORD

This thesis started with a personal preface, and not simply for the didactic benefits of pitching the research question of this study through a story. There is also an ethical and epistemic question of my positionality as a researcher that might have influenced how I posed the question and how I attempted to answer it. Perhaps the most consequential of those potential influences relate to the ontological embeddedness of this project that I acknowledged in theory but did not yet address in more practical terms.

I cannot say that I consciously have a preferred ontological interpretation of ELE or a preferred strategy for its future development. I also believe that the boundary between what I termed a philosophical and an empirical approach to the study of ELE is in reality more porous than those heuristics might suggest (the same can be said of the four models). While at different moments of this research I was locating myself closer to either strategy, ontology, or theoretical framework, I did not embrace any of them to the full exclusion of the others. In hindsight, I think this was fitting for a thesis in 'Education Research'.

This oscillation revealed itself, for example, when I found myself craving for philosophical relevance during the data analysis of empirical material, or when I attempted to anchor the conceptual operations required in the empirical data. While I certainly had moments of doubt if I had applied any of those lenses well enough, I was determined not to reject either of them as they all provided partial pictures that contributed to the fuller understanding of ELE.

Depending on the perspective, this inability to pledge allegiance to one worldview and to denounce others as mistaken and unhelpful might either be seen as a weakness or a strength.

For this reason, it might be best for other researchers, if they find this dissertation helpful, to describe the larger positionality of this research. But this might only be possible if I have admitted to a sentiment that I only felt while I was already deep in the process of this research: impatience. The more I knew about the first leaders, the stronger was my conviction that the current opportunities to make ELE affect a larger group of people are not properly utilised. It appears to me that both the state of the debate on ELE, and the limited extent of cooperation between ELEs contribute to those forlorn opportunities. Collaborating with current students of ELEs for the eBook (Dirksen et al., 2017), during LESC conferences, and on ELAI website, I realised that I am not alone with this concern. I do not wish ELE to remain a privilege for the fortunate as it seems to be today, but I equally hope ELE would not be just all things to all people.

I studied the first leaders not only because I valued their contribution and found the topic interesting, but also because I wanted to better understand how I can learn from them. This

was not disinterested research: I care about ELE, and ideally, I would want to participate in the future of ELE in some kind of a leadership role. I also realise that finding a research-based answer to the common vision might increase the chances I will be allowed to contribute to ELE in those ways in the future. But this research was not merely a path of self-discovery or a tool for career advancement; I think its long-term value might come in the form of lessons from the first leaders who, for all their shortcomings, managed to create transformative educational environments in which people thrived and flourished. Those lessons have less to do with particular solutions, and more with the lines of thinking and acting that first leaders developed to help get us all where we are now.

This allows to take one last look at the practical dilemma outlined in the previous section as a strategic choice between conceptual amplification and dispersion of ELE. My personal view is that a countermovement situation which first leaders created might not be enough in the near future; I treat the impostor infiltration as a real possibility, but I also do not see a universally accepted way of once and for all drawing the line between 'genuine' and 'fake' forms of ELE. There is no running away from ontological and strategic allegiances to the safe haven of objective research: boundary determinations will become unavoidable, and making them would require dialogue, judgement, and responsibility. If I was ever asked, what my advice would then be? I am not yet sure, but I know that one last reason I was so determined to speak with first leaders was because I wanted to see others who took a public stand on their preferred vision of ELE and managed to defend it not only before others – but primarily before themselves. For this fact alone, I truly admire them all.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Literature relevant for the study of ELE

#### **European Liberal Arts Initiative Recommended Literature for studying European Liberal Education**

Liberal Arts Education have received a renewed attention in Europe over the last three decades. This ‘second coming’ inspired a considerable body of scholarly literature, primarily in English, distributed across many formats, outlets, and disciplines.

Researchers, educators, students, journalists, and all others interested in liberal arts in Europe now have a one-stop overview of those relevant works. European Liberal Arts Initiative (ELAI) has collected links or bibliographic references of over 100 pieces of relevant scholarly literature to facilitate the exchange of existing and the creation of new knowledge.

This list has been organised according to the focus and size of works included.

Five major foci have been identified: (1) core works containing an overview of European liberal education, (2) case studies of particular programs/institutions/models, (3) special themes, (4) global comparisons, as well as (5) works of relevance discussing history, theory, and the idea of liberal education. In most categories some sub-foci have been identified for clarity of presentation. Classification follows from a judgement of the primary intention and/or usefulness of particular work to particular aim.

With regards to format, in each category works have been roughly divided into peer-reviewed (academic) and other (everything else). Peer reviewed works have been further split according to size into short (encyclopaedia entries, magazine briefs), mid-size (journal articles, book chapters) and long (books, journal issues, dissertations). In case of edited volumes and journal issues, individual contributions have only been listed separately when they are directly relevant to European liberal arts. Not peer reviewed works include especially lectures, pamphlets, and works of advocacy. Empty sub-categories are not listed.

As of now, this list is intended to be updated on a quarterly basis.

If you would like to propose a new item to be added, a correction of existing entry, or general feedback about the list, please email ELAI at [info \(at\) liberal-arts.eu](mailto:info@liberal-arts.eu) Likewise, if you have trouble accessing any of the listed resources, do get in contact, as we might be able to help.

Compiled by:  
Daniel Kontowski  
[www.liberal-arts.eu](http://www.liberal-arts.eu)

## 1. FOCUS: CORE WORKS ON CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN LIBERAL ARTS

### 1.1. SUB-FOCUS: EMPIRICAL (MORE COMPARATIVE)

#### 1.1.1. PEER-REVIEWED

##### Short

Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market (ROA), Maastricht University. (2018). *Liberal Arts & Sciences Programmes alumni survey factsheet 2017*. Maastricht. Retrieved from <https://www.universitycolleges.info/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Factsheet-LAS-Alumni-Survey.pdf>

##### Mid-size

Telling, K. (2018). Selling the Liberal Arts Degree in England: Unique Students, Generic Skills and Mass Higher Education. *Sociology*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038517750548>

Van der Wende, M. (2017). The emergence of liberal arts and sciences education in Europe: A comparative perspective. In *The Evolution of Liberal Arts in the Global Age* (pp. 128–148). Routledge.

van der Wende, M. C. (2011). The Emergence of Liberal Arts and Sciences Education in Europe: A Comparative Perspective. *Higher Education Policy*, 24, 233 – 253. <https://doi.org/10.1057/hep.2011.3>

#### 1.1.2. OTHER

Boetsch, L., Balli, V., & Schreel, L. (2017). *Guide to Emerging Liberal Arts and Sciences Practices in the EU*. Retrieved from <http://www.ecolas.eu/eng/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Handbook-final-BLASTER.pdf>

Dekker, T. J. (2019). *The 7 democratic virtues of liberal education*. Maastricht: Maastricht University. Retrieved from [https://ppp.maastrichtuniversity.nl/sites/default/files/The\\_7\\_democratic\\_virtues\\_of\\_liberal\\_education.pdf](https://ppp.maastrichtuniversity.nl/sites/default/files/The_7_democratic_virtues_of_liberal_education.pdf)

Hoff, T., & Kontowski, D. (2017). *ELAI database*. Retrieved from [www.liberal-arts.eu](http://www.liberal-arts.eu)

### 1.2. SUB-FOCUS: CONCEPTUAL (MORE GENERAL)

#### 1.2.1. PEER-REVIEWED

##### Short

Dekker, T. J. (2017c). Liberal Arts in Europe. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (pp. 1–6). Singapore: Springer. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\\_569-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_569-1)

#### 1.2.2. OTHER

Jenainati, C., Jelacic, V., Fisher, R., & Monk, N. (2017). *Companion to Undergraduate Research in the Liberal Arts and Sciences*. BLASTER. Retrieved from [http://www.ecolas.eu/eng/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/1-curlas\\_2017.pdf](http://www.ecolas.eu/eng/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/1-curlas_2017.pdf)

Pleschová, G., Monk, N., Fisher, R., Gaydon, P., Loyens, S., & Rikkers, R. (2017). *Learning and Teaching in the Liberal Arts. A Teacher Training Kit*. BLASTER. Retrieved from <http://www.ecolas.eu/eng/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Learning-and-Teaching-in-the-Liberal-Arts-small.pdf>

Schwartz-Leeper, G. (2018, September 11). A Guide to Liberal Education Programmes. Liberal Arts at University of Warwick. Retrieved from <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/schoolforcross-facultystudies/liberalarts/prospectivestudents/laguide/>

University College Deans Network. (2014). *Statement on the Role, Characteristics, and Cooperation of Liberal Arts and Sciences Colleges in the Netherlands*. Retrieved from <https://www.universitycolleges.info/>

## 2. FOCUS: CASE STUDIES

### 2.1. SUB-FOCUS: WESTERN EUROPE

#### 2.1.1. PEER-REVIEWED

##### Mid-size

Boon, L. (2014). Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Netherlands Development and Relation to Interdisciplinary Education. In P. Weingart & B. Padberg (Eds.), *University Experiments in Interdisciplinarity. Obstacles and Opportunities* (pp. 37–48). Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

Eschenbruch, N., Gehrke, H.-J., & Sterzel, P. (2016). University College Freiburg: Toward a New Unity of Research and Teaching in Academia. In C. W. Kirby & C. M. van der Wende (Eds.), *Experiences in Liberal Arts and Science Education from America, Europe, and Asia: A Dialogue across Continents* (pp. 91–108). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US. [https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-94892-5\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-349-94892-5_7)

Gombrich, C. (2017). Integrating Sciences and Engineering in the Liberal Arts Curriculum. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (pp. 1–6). Singapore: Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\\_563-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_563-1)

Kontowski, D., & Kretz, D. (2017). Liberal Education under Financial Pressure: The Case of Private German Universities. In R. Deem & H. Eiggins (Eds.), *The University as a Critical Institution?* (Higher Edu, pp. 111–133). Rotterdam - Boston - Taipei: Sense Publishers. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6351-116-2\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6351-116-2_7)

van der Wende, M. C. (2012). *Trends towards global excellence in undergraduate education: taking the liberal arts experience into the 21st century*. Berkeley. Retrieved from <http://www.auc.nl/binaries/content/assets/projectsites/amsterdam-university-college/publicaties-mvdw/rops.wende.excellenceugeducation.12.3.2012.pdf?2850959376929>

van der Wende, M. C. (2013). An Excellence Initiative in Liberal Arts and Science Education: The Case of Amsterdam University College. In Q. Wang, Y. Cheng, & N. C. Liu (Eds.), *Building World-Class Universities. Different Approaches to a Common Goal* (pp. 89–102). Shanghai: Sense Publishers.

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##### Long

Tak, H., & Oomen, B. (Eds.). (2012). *De disciplines voorbij. De colleges van Hans Adriaansens*. Middelburg: De Drukkery. Retrieved from <http://www.ucr.nl/about-ucr/history-UCR/Pages/De-Disciplines-Voorbij—De-Colleges-van-Hans-Adriaansens.aspx> <http://www.ucr.nl/about-ucr/history-UCR/Documents/1.html>

#### 2.1.2. OTHER

- Adriaansens, H. P. M. (2014). The Dutch Mix: the international university college. St. Petersburg. Retrieved from <http://opendekoepel.nl/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/St.-Petersburg-the-Dutch-Mix-kopie-2.pdf>
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## 2.2. SUB-FOCUS: EASTERN EUROPE

### 2.2.1. PEER-REVIEWED

#### Mid-size

- Abrahám, S. (2017). BISLA and ECOLAS: Hubs of the Liberal Arts in Europe. In T. Purington & J. Skaggs (Eds.), *American universities abroad : the leadership of independent transnational higher education institutions* (pp. 103–120). Cairo, New York: American University in Cairo Press.
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Mikhailov, A. (2009). University in Exile : The Experience of the Twenty- First Century. *Social Research*, 76(3), 849–866. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40972161>

## Long

Becker, J. (Ed.). (2017). *Voprosy Obrazovaniya/ Educational Studies. Moscow 2015 4 Special Issue: Liberal Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geog.2017.11.004>

### 2.2.2. OTHER

Axer, J. (1997). What is liberal education? Can it support both freedom and equality? Is it for everybody? *Kritika a Kontext*, 4, 116–118.

Axer, J. (1998). How the Classical Tradition Can Serve to Promote Liberal Education in the Twenty-First Century. The East--Central Europe Case Example. *Kritika and Kontext*, 1, 113–116.

Farnham, N. (1999). *Liberal Education in Central and Eastern Europe (1.07.1999 lecture at Smolny Institute, St. Petersburg)*.

## 3. FOCUS: THEMES IN LE

### 3.1. SUB-FOCUS; STUDENT PERSPECTIVES

#### 3.1.1. PEER-REVIEWED

## Short

Dirksen, J. T. (2017). Liberal Arts Education in Europe, A Student's View of. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (pp. 1–7). Singapore: Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\\_565-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_565-1)

## Mid-size

Bergland, B. (2018). The incompatibility of neoliberal university structures and interdisciplinary knowledge: A feminist slow scholarship critique. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(11), 1031–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1341297>

Claus, J., Meckel, T., & Pätz, F. (2018). The new spirit of capitalism in European Liberal Arts programs. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(11), 1011–1019. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1341298>

Cooper, N. (2018). Evaluating the liberal arts model in the context of the Dutch University College. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(11), 1060–1067. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1341299>

Haberberger, C. (2018). A return to understanding: Making liberal education valuable again. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(11), 1052–1059. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1342157>

Lundbye Cone, L. (2018). Towards a university of Halbbildung : How the neoliberal mode of higher education governance in Europe is half-educating students for a misleading future. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(11), 1018–1028. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1341828>

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Tidbury, I. (2018). Is twenty-first-century liberal arts modern? *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(11), 1045–1051. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1341827>

## Long

Dirksen, J. T. V., Kontowski, D., & Kretz, D. (Eds.). (2017). *What Is Liberal Education and What Could It Be? European Students On Their Liberal Arts Education*. Delphi: LESC. Retrieved from <http://liberal-arts.eu/ebook/>

Tubbs, N., & Dirksen, J. T. (2018). Introduction for Special Issue of Submissions from European Liberal Education Student Conference. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 50(11), 1008–1010. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2017.1358316>

### 3.2. SUB-FOCUS: CORE TEXTS AND GREAT BOOKS

#### 3.2.1. PEER-REVIEWED

## Short

Lee, J. S. (2017). Core Texts and Liberal Education. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (pp. 1–8). Singapore: Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\\_566-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_566-1)

Taylor, M. (2017). Liberal Arts for Teachers, Pupils, and Schools. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (pp. 1–6). Singapore: Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\\_581-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_581-2)

## Long

Cohen de Lara, E., & Drop, H. (Eds.). (2017). *Back to the Core: Rethinking the Core Texts in Liberal Arts & Sciences Education in Europe*. Wilmington: Vernon Press.

### 3.3. SUB-FOCUS: US-EUROPE COMPARISONS

#### 3.3.1. PEER-REVIEWED

## Mid-size

Harward, D. W. (2007). Why the Effort to Establish Liberal Education in East---Central Europe Might Prove Interesting for American Educators. In J. Kieniewicz (Ed.), *Autonomia uniwersytetu. jej przyjaciele i wrogowie* (pp. 123–136). Warszawa: Fundacja Instytut “Artes Liberales.”

Kontowski, D. (2016c). The Paradox of “Practical Liberal Arts”. Lessons from the Wagner College Case for Liberal (Arts) Education in Eastern Europe. *Educational Studies. Moscow*, 3(3), 80–109. <https://doi.org/10.17323/1814-9545-2016-3-80><sup>173</sup>

## Long

Mehrens, P. (2006). *Learning from Liberal Arts Education Ideas for the Improvement of Undergraduate Education in Sweden*. Uppsala. Retrieved from <http://uu.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:109174/FULLTEXT01.pdf>

O'Connor, M., & Wilczek, P. (2011). *Collegium / College / Kolegium. Kolegium i wspólnota akademicka w tradycji amerykańskiej i europejskiej*. Boston - Warszawa: Sub Lupa. Retrieved from [https://www.academia.edu/4252669/Piotr\\_Wilczek\\_Mark\\_OConnor\\_edds\\_Collegium\\_College\\_Kol](https://www.academia.edu/4252669/Piotr_Wilczek_Mark_OConnor_edds_Collegium_College_Kol)

<sup>173</sup> Also available in Russian: Kontowski, D. (2016). Парадокс «практических либеральных искусств» Пример Вагнер-колледжа и его значение для либерального образования в Восточной Европе. *Voprosy Obrazovaniya / Educational Studies (Moscow)*, 3, 80–109. <https://doi.org/10.17323/1814-9545-2016-3-80-109>

egium. College and the Academic Community in the European and the American Tradition.  
Boston Warsaw 2011 288 pp

### 3.3.2. OTHER

Rose, P. I. (2007). *Smith in the Netherlands: A Transatlantic Connection*. Retrieved from  
<http://www.smith.edu/news/2007-08/SmithintheNetherlands.php>

## 4. FOCUS: Global (non-US) liberal education

### 4.1. PEER-REVIEWED

#### Short

Godwin, K. A. (2015b). The Worldwide Emergence of Liberal Education. *International Higher Education*, (79), 2–4. <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ihe/article/view/5835/5199>

Haishao, P., Wenqin, S., & Ding kai, H. (2018). Liberal Arts and Suzhi Education. In M. A. Peters (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (pp. 1–5). Singapore: Springer Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7\\_570-1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-532-7_570-1)

Long, K. A. (2018a). Battle of the Brand: Independent “American” Universities Abroad. *International Higher Education*, (95), 4. <https://doi.org/10.6017/ihe.2018.95.10680>

#### Mid-size

Becker, J., & Gillespie, S. (2017). Adapting Liberal Arts and Sciences as a System of Education. In T. Purington & J. Skaggs (Eds.), *American universities abroad : the leadership of independent transnational higher education institutions* (pp. 267–286). Cairo, New York: American University in Cairo Press.

Detweiler, R. A. (2017). Achieving Liberal Arts Education Transnationally: Where From, How, and Where To? In T. Purington & J. Skaggs (Eds.), *American universities abroad : the leadership of independent transnational higher education institutions* (pp. 11–26). Cairo, New York: American University in Cairo Press.

Gillespie, S. (2001). Opening Minds: The International Liberal Education Movement. *World Policy Journal*, Winter, 79–89. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40209781>

Godwin, K. A. (2015a). The Counter Narrative: Critical Analysis of Liberal Education in Global Context. *New Global Studies*, 9(3), 223–244. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ngs-2015-0033>

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## Appendix 2. ELAI database (selection)

|    | Name of the programme  | Country          | City                  | Year established | Language of instruction | Ownership status | Hosting / affiliated institution  | Type Code | ALA (1997) | ECOLAS (2008-) | van der Wende (2011) | Godwin's GLEI (2013) | MLA (2010-?) |
|----|--|------------------|-----------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------|---|-----------|------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|--------------|
| 1  | Bard College Berlin  | Germany          | Berlin                | 1999             | English                 | Private          | Bard College (USA)  | 1.a       |            | +              | +                    | +                    |              |
| 2  | Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts                        | Slovakia         | Bratislava            | 2006             | Slovak                  | Private          | Bratislava Institute of Humanism (Slovakia)   | 1.a       | +          | +              | +                    | +                    | +            |
| 3  | Chavagnes Studium  | France           | Chavagnes-en-Paillers | 2018             | English                 | Private          | ICES, Institut Catholique d'Etudes Supérieures Catholique University of the Vendée; John Paul II Catholic University Lublin | 1.a       |            |                |                      |                      |              |
| 4  | Charles University, Faculty of Humanities, Liberal Arts and Humanities | Czech Republic   | Prague                | 1994             | Czech                   | Public           |   | 2.a       |            | +              | +                    | +                    |              |
| 5  | University College Utrecht (UCU)                                       | The Netherlands  | Utrecht               | 1998             | English                 | Public           | Utrecht University (Netherlands)  | 2.a       |            | +              | +                    | +                    | +            |
| 6  | Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences, St. Petersburg State University  | Russia           | St. Petersburg        | 1999             | Russian                 | Public           | St. Petersburg State University (Russia) and Bard College (USA)   | 2.a       |            |                | +                    | +                    | +            |
| 7  | St. Mary's University College Belfast                                  | Northern Ireland | Belfast               | 2000             | English                 | Public           | Queen's University Belfast (UK)   | 2.a       |            | +              |                      | +                    | +            |
| 8  | University College Maastricht (UCM)                                    | The Netherlands  | Maastricht            | 2002             | English                 | Public           | Maastricht University (Netherlands)   | 2.a       |            | +              | +                    | +                    | +            |
| 9  | University College Roosevelt (UCR)                                     | The Netherlands  | Middelburg            | 2004             | English                 | Public           | Utrecht University (Netherlands)  | 2.a       |            | +              | +                    | +                    |              |
| 10 | Collegium Artes Liberales (CLAS)                                       | Poland           | Warsaw                | 2008             | Polish                  | Public           | University of Warsaw (Poland)   | 2.a       |            | +              |                      | +                    |              |

|    |   |                 |            |      |         |        |  |     |  |   |   |   |   |
|----|---|-----------------|------------|------|---------|--------|--|-----|--|---|---|---|---|
| 11 | <b>University College Tilburg</b>   | The Netherlands | Tilburg    | 2008 | English | Public | Tilburg University (Netherlands)   | 2.a |  | + |   | + |   |
| 12 | <b>Amsterdam University College</b>   | The Netherlands | Amsterdam  | 2009 | English | Public | University of Amsterdam (Netherlands)<br>VU University Amsterdam (Netherlands) | 2.a |  | + | + | + | + |
| 13 | <b>Leiden University College The Hague (LUC)</b>  | The Netherlands | The Hague  | 2010 | English | Public | Leiden University (Netherlands)  | 2.a |  | + | + | + |   |
| 14 | <b>Erasmus University College</b>   | The Netherlands | Rotterdam  | 2013 | English | Public | Erasmus University Rotterdam (Netherlands)                                     | 2.a |  |   |   |   | + |
| 15 | <b>University College Twente</b>  | The Netherlands | Twente     | 2013 | English | Public | University Twente (Netherlands)  | 2.a |  | + |   |   |   |
| 16 | <b>University College Groningen</b>   | The Netherlands | Groningen  | 2014 | English | Public | University of Groningen (Netherlands)  | 2.a |  |   |   |   |   |
| 17 | <b>University College Venlo</b>   | The Netherlands | Venlo      | 2014 | English | Public | Maastricht University (Netherlands)  | 2.a |  |   |   |   |   |
| 18 | <b>University of Malta; Programme in the Liberal Arts and Sciences (PLAS)</b>           | Malta           | Msida      | 2014 | English | Public | University of Malta  | 2.a |  |   |   |   |   |
| 19 | <b>Uppsala University Liberal Arts Programmet (formerly University College Gotland)</b> | Sweden          | Visby      | 1998 | Swedish | Public | Uppsala University (SE)  | 2.b |  |   | + | + |   |
| 20 | <b>Utrecht University; Liberal Arts and Sciences</b>                                    | The Netherlands | Utrecht    | 2004 | Dutch   | Public | Utrecht University (Netherlands)   | 2.b |  |   |   |   |   |
| 21 | <b>University of Winchester; Modern Liberal Arts Programme</b>                          | UK              | Winchester | 2010 | English | Public | University of Winchester, UK   | 2.b |  | + | + | + |   |

|    |   |          |            |      |                  |        |  |     |   |   |  |   |   |   |
|----|---|----------|------------|------|------------------|--------|--|-----|---|---|--|---|---|---|
| 22 | University of Lisbon, Course of General Studies                       | Portugal | Lisbon     | 2011 | Portuguese       | Public | School of Arts and Humanities - University of Lisbon; [PT: Faculdade de Letras da Universidade de Lisboa | 2.b |   |   |  |   |   |   |
| 23 | University of Gothenburg; Liberal Arts Programme                      | Sweden   | Goteborg   | 2011 | Swedish          | Public | University of Gothenburg   | 2.b |   |   |  |   |   |   |
| 24 | Tallinn University; Liberal Arts in Humanities                        | Estonia  | Tallinn    | 2012 | English          | Public | Tallinn University   | 2.b | + |   |  |   |   |   |
| 25 | Tallinn University; Liberal Arts in Social Sciences                   | Estonia  | Tallinn    | 2012 | English          | Public | Tallinn University   | 2.b |   |   |  |   |   |   |
| 26 | King's College London, Liberal Arts Program                           | UK       | London     | 2012 | English          | Public | King's College London (UK)   | 2.b |   |   |  |   | + |   |
| 27 | University College Freiburg   | Germany  | Freiburg   | 2012 | English          | Public | University of Freiburg (Germany)   | 2.b |   |   |  | + | + |   |
| 28 | University College London; Arts and Sciences BASc Programme           | UK       | London     | 2012 | English          | Public | University College London  | 2.b |   |   |  | + | + |   |
| 29 | Studium Individuale, Leuphana University of Lüneburg                  | Germany  | Lüneburg   | 2012 | German / English | Public |  | 2.b |   | + |  |   |   | + |
| 30 | University of Essex; Liberal Arts Programme                           | UK       | Essex      | 2012 | English          | Public |  | 2.b |   |   |  |   |   |   |
| 31 | University of Aix-Marseille: Science and Humanities Bachelor's Degree | France   | Marseille  | 2012 | French           | Public | University of Aix-Marseille  | 2.b |   |   |  |   |   |   |
| 32 | University of Birmingham; Liberal Arts & Sciences Programme           | UK       | Birmingham | 2013 | English          | Public | University of Birmingham   | 2.b |   |   |  |   | + |   |
| 33 | University of Exeter; Liberal Arts Programme                          | UK       | Exeter     | 2013 | English          | Public | University of Exeter   | 2.b |   |   |  |   | + |   |



|    |  |                  |            |      |                              |         |   |     |   |   |  |   |  |
|----|--|------------------|------------|------|------------------------------|---------|---|-----|---|---|--|---|--|
| 46 | University of Central Lancashire; Liberal Arts Programme                                 | UK               | Preston    | 2018 | English                      | Public  |   | 2.b |   |   |  |   |  |
| 47 | University of Nottingham; Liberal Arts Programme   | UK               | Nottingham | 2018 | English                      | Public  |   | 2.b |   |   |  |   |  |
| 48 | International Theological Institute (ITI); Liberal Arts Programme                        | Austria          | Trumau     | 2018 | English                      | Private |   | 2.b |   |   |  |   |  |
| 49 | Queen's University Belfast; MLibArts Liberal Arts  | Northern Ireland | Belfast    | 2018 | English                      | Public  |   | 2.b |   |   |  |   |  |
| 50 | University of Wales Trinity Saint David; Liberal Arts                                    | UK               | Lampeter   | 2018 | English                      | Public  |   | 2.b |   |   |  |   |  |
| 51 | Leuphana University of Lüneburg  | Germany          | Lüneburg   | 1946 | German / English             | Public  |   | 3.a |   |   |  |   |  |
| 52 | Witten/Herdecke University   | Germany          | Witten     | 1982 | German                       | Private |   | 3.a |   |   |  | + |  |
| 53 | Vytautas Magnus University   | Lithuania        | Kaunas     | 1989 | Lithuanian                   | Public  |   | 3.a |   | + |  | + |  |
| 54 | University of Cyprus   | Cyprus           | Nicosia    | 1989 | Greek                        | Public  |   | 3.a |   |   |  |   |  |
| 55 | LCC International University   | Lithuania        | Klaipeda   | 1991 | English                      | Private | Established in 1991 by a joint venture of Lithuanian, Canadian and American foundations | 3.a |   | + |  |   |  |
| 56 | European Humanities University   | Lithuania        | Vilnius    | 1992 | Belarusian, Russian, English | Private |   | 3.a |   | + |  |   |  |
| 57 | Collegium of Inter-Faculty/Interdisciplinary Individual Studies in the Humanities (MISH) | Poland           | Warsaw     | 1993 | Polish                       | Public  | University of Warsaw  | 3.a | + |   |  |   |  |

|    |   |         |                 |      |         |         |   |     |  |   |   |   |  |
|----|---|---------|-----------------|------|---------|---------|---|-----|--|---|---|---|--|
| 58 | <b>MISH-S UMK</b>   | Poland  | Torun           | 1997 | Polish  | Public  | Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń           | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 59 | <b>University of Silesia; College of Interdisciplinary Individual Studies</b> | Poland  | Katowice        | 1997 | Polish  | Public  | University of Silesia                             | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 60 | <b>MISH UJ</b>  | Poland  | Cracow          | 2000 | Polish  | Public  | Jagiellonian University, Cracow                   | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 61 | <b>MISHuS KUL</b>   | Poland  | Lublin          | 2000 | Polish  | Public  | John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin        | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 62 | <b>Bucerius Law School</b>  | Germany | Hamburg         | 2000 | German  | Private |   | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 63 | <b>Jacobs University</b>  | Germany | Bremen          | 2001 | English | Private |   | 3.a |  | + | + | + |  |
| 64 | <b>MISHiS UAM</b>   | Poland  | Poznan          | 2002 | Polish  | Public  | Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznan                | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 65 | <b>Zeppelin University</b>  | Germany | Friedrichshafen | 2003 | German  | Private |   | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 66 | <b>University of Wrocław: Kolegium MSI</b>                                    | Poland  | Wrocław         | 2004 | Polish  | Public  | University of Wrocław                             | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 67 | <b>Center for Interdisciplinary Individual Education in Humanities (MIGO)</b> | Russia  | Rostov          | 2006 | Russian | Public  | Sothorn Federal University (SFedU), Rostov on Don | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 68 | <b>MISH-S UŁ</b>  | Poland  | Lodz            | 2008 | Polish  | Public  | University of Lodz                                | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |
| 69 | <b>Benedictus Liberal Arts Trust, United Kingdom</b>                          | UK      | London          | 2010 | English | Private |   | 3.a |  |   |   |   |  |

|    |  |         |            |      |                           |         |  |     |  |   |  |  |   |  |
|----|--|---------|------------|------|---------------------------|---------|--|-----|--|---|--|--|---|--|
| 70 | <b>International Theological Institute (ITI): Studium Generale</b>                             | Austria | Trumau     | 2010 | English                   | Private |  | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 71 | <b>New College of the Humanities</b>   | UK      | London     | 2011 | English                   | Private | University of London (UK)  | 3.a |  |   |  |  | + |  |
| 72 | <b>KU Leuven Campus Kulak Kortrijk</b>   | Belgium | Kortrijk   | 2011 | Dutch                     | Public  | KU Leuven (Belgium)  | 3.a |  | + |  |  | + |  |
| 73 | <b>MISH UO</b>   | Poland  | Opole      | 2011 | Polish                    | Public  | University of Opole  | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 74 | <b>Higher School of Economics / New Economic School: Economics Double Degree Program</b>       | Russia  | Moscow     | 2011 | Russian, English          | Public  | Higher School of Economics and New Economic School                         | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 75 | <b>University of Bordeaux Montaigne: Licence Culture humaniste et scientifique</b>             | France  | Bordeaux   | 2011 | French                    | Public  | University of Bordeaux   | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 76 | <b>RaNePa Liberal Arts College</b>   | Russia  | Moscow     | 2012 | Russian                   | Public  | Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 77 | <b>European College of Liberal Arts in Belarus</b>   | Belarus | Minsk      | 2014 | Belarusian, Russian       | Private |  | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 78 | <b>University of Navarra - Core Curriculum</b>   | Spain   | Pamplona   | 2015 | Spanish                   | Public  |  | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 79 | <b>University of Winchester - Institute for Value Studies</b>                                  | UK      | Winchester | 2015 | English                   | Public  | University of Winchester   | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 80 | <b>Pompeu Fabra University; Open Degree</b>  | Spain   | Barcelona  | 2015 | Spanish, Catalan, English | Public  | Universitat Pompeu Fabra   | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |
| 81 | <b>Autonomous University of Barcelona; Open Bachelor's Degree in Languages and Literatures</b> | Spain   | Barcelona  | 2016 | Spanish, Catalan, French  | Public  | Autonomous University of Barcelona   | 3.a |  |   |  |  |   |  |

|    |  |                 |            |      |                  |         |                                  |     |  |  |  |  |  |
|----|--|-----------------|------------|------|------------------|---------|----------------------------------|-----|--|--|--|--|--|
| 82 | <b>Charles III University of Madrid; Open Degree in Social Sciences and Humanities</b> | Spain           | Madrid     | 2016 | Spanish, English | Public  | Universidad Carlos III de Madrid | 3.a |  |  |  |  |  |
| 83 | <b>University of Winchester: Contemporary Conversations module</b>                     | UK              | Winchester | 2018 | English          | Public  | University of Winchester         | 3.a |  |  |  |  |  |
| 84 | <b>ALLAS: Amstel Institute for the Liberal Arts and Sciences</b>                       | The Netherlands | Amsterdam  | 2019 | English          | Private |                                  | 3.a |  |  |  |  |  |

### Appendix 3. Initial, document-based descriptions of the programmes

Compiled in early 2016.

#### *European Humanities University*

##### AIMS

EHU was established with the democratic-pragmatic idea that only those who think critically can be free citizens, and only free citizens can sustain a free country. After years of ideological indoctrination and impenetrable disciplinary boundaries in the Soviet Union, faculty that gathered around Mikhailov wanted to create an alternative education institution, one that would be free from various limitations and build free research and teaching in humanities and the social sciences. The exercise of reuniting Belarus with (Western) European liberal arts tradition was conceived to be in line with democratization of the country, and it remains as such even as an exiled institution. At the same time, its long term goal was to create 'academic and professional élite capable of regenerating Belarusian institutions and bringing the country back into the international community'(EUA 2014 3).

##### PRINCIPLES

Although the university claims to be interdisciplinary and international, it remains strongly attached to cultural traditions of Belarus. As a university in exile, the core curriculum – the common experience of all students – is devoted to the humanities, languages and understanding of history of Belarus. The institution runs series of public outreach activities, not limited to academic events, doubling as a cultural centre for diaspora. Due to the character of the student body and online provision, it is hard to determine what (if any) pedagogy is dominating in terms of student learning.

##### VALUES

Education at EHU was guided by the value of academic freedom, which was to be restored, and political liberalism, at least from the perspective of the current regime. Critical thinking and independent responsibility of a student, both novelties in a post-Soviet space, were to be essential for achieving its long term aims.

#### *MISH (Individual Inter-Faculty Studies in the Humanities)*

##### AIMS

The generic aim of MISH was to provide a laboratory of a transformation of the whole University into a more interdisciplinary structure allowing for pursuing intellectual interests. As no such changes have been approved, later on it focussed on providing access to the gifted students to the classes they want to teach and faculty members they might collaborate with. All activities related to MISH are purely academic, and many students continue to their PhD.

##### PRINCIPLES

Every MISH student has her own tutor, which ideally works with them in a master-apprentice model. The curriculum is based on the principle of student choice, according to the rules provided by the faculties, and individual responsibility of the students for consequences of those choices.

##### VALUES

MISH is based on a vision of active, critically reflecting person, operating within an engaged, republican community (potentially oppositional), based on autonomy and trust; for MISH this is an academic community.

#### *Smolny College*

##### AIMS

Ultimate aim of the studies in Smolny is to provide students with the skills that would allow them succeed in the changing global economy, at least that is the official version since any kind of political motivations would further jeopardize its existence, which is why most of the events are of academic and closed character.

## PRINCIPLES

First goes the idea of critical thinking (through academic writing seminar, first year great books seminar and more interactive lectures), but the most visible and different part is the choice of major and courses in distribution requirements with the assistance of a tutor.

## VALUES

Smolny was based on the principle of democratizing education in pedagogical relations with a teacher, yet without losing its perceived usefulness. Therefore highly praised are freedom of choice, rational argumentation. Smolny is also highly related to arts.

### *European College of Liberal Arts*

#### AIMS

The aim of ECLA was to create a space for innovative, interdisciplinary education, in a very radical sense of both words: to include students as human beings (not as students majoring in some discipline) into a conversation regarding values in a multicultural society. This conversation was based on a shared concern between students and faculty. Both parties, treating each other as peers, engaged in discussion to achieve understanding of the pluralism connected to any value question.

#### PRINCIPLES

Core courses (50% of the curriculum) were co-taught by 2-5 members of staff, to bring interdisciplinary dialogue to life. Small seminars were supplemented by tutorials, during which students received in-depth, individual feedback on their essays. Meaningful conversations were praised more than elaborate and esoteric knowledge, and with a small scale setting, every member of ECLA community was visible.

#### VALUES

Values studies were based on self-knowledge, reflection and civility, discipline, expertise and wisdom, as well as equality, humility and solidarity (Nørgaard, Hajnal, 2014). ECLA had a needs-based financial aid, making it accessible to anybody regardless of their financial situation.

### *University College Roosevelt*

#### AIMS

As in other UC in the Netherlands, there were two aims behind UCR: to create conditions in which student can „nothing but succeed’, as well as complement the existing offer in Dutch higher education with a study in English and highly internationalized community. Especially in UCR, such education is supposed to develop moral awareness, through in and out of class activities.

#### PRINCIPLES

UCR operates on the basis of selection of students (otherwise banned in the Netherlands), and selection of courses by the students once admitted. Compared to other students, they are taking more classes, do much more homework, and have less overlap of knowledge between courses. In small classes students are also learning from each other, develop academic skills that would be useful in their future careers, and global citizenship. UCR has been dubbed „a Dutch mix’ of US liberal arts, Oxbridge size and Bildung pedagogy.

#### VALUES

UCR was founded in an egalitarian society to offer a demanding curriculum requiring work ethic from students to succeed. The college operates in close cooperation with a local community, contributing to cultural life and history of the region. Engaging pedagogies, with important role of teaching, and effective organization of a higher education institution are supposed to make it succeed.

### *Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts*

#### AIMS

BISLA aims to both equip its alumni with a broad set of marketable skills, but also to incite ‘young, talented students’ to become future leaders in a global, national and local community.

This post-communist democratic spirit is complemented by hope to achieve high academic standards. Such education is supposed to teach students how to solve the problems that are not around yet.

#### PRINCIPLES

It is believed that through liberal arts education, an efficient mix of students' efforts and funds provided is achieved, because of ability to teach critical thinking. Cultivation of human mind in small seminars, close contact with faculty doubling as tutors,

#### VALUES

Effective, intensive education is joined with a form of moral (political) commitment, advancing personal well-being of students and international approach. Academic events organised in cooperation with BISLA are advancing the public outreach profile of the institution.

### *Uppsala University Liberal Arts Programmet*

#### AIMS

Future working life requires people with broad competences, and current universities did not entice them. Visby claims that they are educating the whole student and prepare them for employment throughout the curriculum.

#### PRINCIPLES

Building critical thinking, skills and personal confidence at the heart of this program. Moreover, the unique selling point of Visby in Swedish higher education was to overcome overspecialization, with 20% of the curriculum directly dedicated to skills, and 30% based on free choice.

#### VALUES

In Visby care of formation of a student was combined with enhancing their employability, therefore the institution cooperates closely with the local businesses.

### *Modern Liberal Arts*

#### AIMS

By investigating the first principles, MLA student are supposed to live up to the ideal that true freedom is to learn, and learning has no external aim outside of itself. 'One serves democracy by teaching freedom from within the struggles involved in learning about freedom'.

#### PRINCIPLES

MLA is combining three major branches of philosophy, namely metaphysics, philosophy of nature and ethics, in a series of tightly coupled, intensive seminars combining a discussion and common reading of the passages. The dialogue, not academic lecture, is supposed to be a guiding principle of activities within MLA, and it distinguishes MLA from philosophy as an academic principle.

#### VALUES

The 'modern' in the MLA is strong dedication to freedom, so a dedication to overcoming injustice, and relativized understanding of truth, focussing on the contradictions between legitimate points of view. This can also be observed in access (both at entry and in class), in-depth essays and extremely strong ties between the content of the modules.

### *Comparison and discussion*

The results show generally a great pluralism of the idea of liberal education, without even trying to translate those declarations into curricular choices or teaching practice. The aims, principles and values cannot be fully dissected from one another without losing the general outlook of the liberal education in a program. Rather than compare those three levels, it makes more sense to see the themes emerging from the examples:

|  | EH<br>U | MIS<br>H | Smolny | E<br>CLA | UC<br>R | BISL<br>A | VIS<br>BY | ML<br>A |
|--|---------|----------|--------|----------|---------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| <b>Transferrable skills</b>  | X       |          | X      |          |         | X         | X         |         |
| <b>Democratic toolkit</b>  | X       | X        |        | X        |         | X         |           |         |
| <b>Critical thinking</b>   | X       | X        | X      |          | X       | X         | X         |         |
| <b>Philosophical dialogue</b>  |         |          |        | X        |         |           |           | X       |
| <b>International community</b>   |         |          |        | X        | X       |           |           |         |
| <b>Academic freedom</b>  | X       | X        |        |          |         |           |           | X       |
| <b>Hard academic work</b>  |         | X        |        |          | X       | X         |           |         |
| <b>Moral development</b>   |         |          |        | X        | X       | X         |           | X       |
| <b>Personal relation with a teacher</b>                                  |         | X        | X      | X        |         |           |           |         |
| <b>Elite building</b>  | X       | X        |        |          |         | X         |           |         |
| <b>Core curriculum</b>   | X       |          | X      | X        | X       |           | X         | X       |
| <b>Elective curriculum</b>   | X       | X        | X      | X        | X       |           | X         |         |
| <b>Interdisciplinary curriculum with (X) or without (Y) the sciences</b> | Y       | Y        | Y      | Y        | X       | Y         | X         | Y       |

The most common features are critical thinking (mostly understood as marketable skill, but not always) and transferrable skills. Three last rows, which might look like a description of a curriculum, are more than that really: they represent a common intellectual experience, the double principle of student choice-responsibility and the scope of knowledge worthy of the name liberal education.

In the broadest sense, liberal education in Europe is any higher education curriculum that includes courses in more than one discipline, and therefore is different from mainstream traditions of Humboldt or Grandes Écoles (van der Wende 2011). However, as soon as one might want to add anything to that, serious challenges arise. Liberal education started to denote ‘virtually every heartfelt educational objective’ (Glyer and Weeks, 1998, p. x) or simply ‘awesome’ education (Ferrall, 2011, p. 8), and this can be seen very well in case of contemporary European liberal education programs.

It might be generalized, that liberal arts represent both negative and positive conception of freedom, depending on the context of particular program. Empirically they represent more normative than descriptive approach to the concept higher education, with more focus on how education should look like, and not what it really is. Another conclusion might be the backward attitude: instead of good practice that educators try to develop (which can be a common beacon), the examples analysed share mostly a discontent with the mainstream, massified, disciplinary, factory-like university, and from this point depart in different ways that represent

what is European liberal education at the moment. That would also explain why national contexts play such an important role in shaping the liberal arts 'movement'.

Work of the previous scholars does not adequately represent this plurality. Van der Wende's (2011) claim that behind European Liberal Education was primarily a need of broader and more selective curricula is for example contradicted by BISLA, ECLA and MLA, that are hardly broader, and almost all of the institutions analysed (apart of MISH) that do not underline the selectivity. On the other hand, Godwin's (2013) description of curricular innovation (in Western Europe) and political change (in Eastern Europe) seem closer to the ideas displayed by the institutions; It should be borne in mind that democratization is (aside of EHU) considered a side effect of liberal education, not its core aim, whereas some of the Western programmes introduced less narrow programmes for economic, others from intellectual motivations. The Bologna Process, focussing on learning outcomes, internationalization and transferrable skills, quoted by both authors as a catalyst of a change, has at best cursory relation with contemporary European liberal education programs. There is also uneasy relation between liberal education, that historically been both personally and ideally connected to leisure, and the economy that tends to dominate a lot of debates of the aim of higher education across Europe

As compared to what is liberal education in the US (and once again, this is an oversimplification), liberal education in Europe has generally more academic scope, with less developed campus culture, civic engagement, or holistic approach to the student who is seen primarily as a talented young person looking to expand the knowledge and better enhance the skills. As such, ELEs are more about quality than necessarily equality: even if they praise diversity, this is mostly due to an international character of the program, not diversity of background of admitted students. On the other hand, ELEs are much more affordable than their US counterparts, especially if they are part of public higher education as many of them are, and as such they are more accessible (even if they do not stress that).

Contemporary European liberal education programmes remain generally closed for a local community, more or less consciously, focussing on a meaningful education for those inside and less so on the potential benefit from the research, dialogue or cultural activities brought up by the campuses. The democratic dialogue is supposed to happen in the classroom, not outside of it. Because of a small scale, contemporary European liberal education programmes do not generally achieve great visibility, although they had their share of top achievers in particular higher education systems, and over time they might scale up provided that they want to. Seeing the American enthusiasm for promoting liberal education shifting to Southeast Asia, they are also under a growing pressure to present themselves as inherent part of national contexts, which might induce convergence (within the movement) and mainstreaming (within higher education systems) and in the long-term loss of their differentia specifica.<sup>175</sup>

<sup>175</sup> Descriptions of the programmes were primarily based on the content of the websites: EHU

<http://www.ehu.lt/en/> ; MISH <http://www.mish.uw.edu.pl/> ; Smolny  
<http://artesliberales.spbu.ru/> ; ECLA not available; UCR <http://www.ucr.nl/>  
; BISLA <http://www.bisla.sk/english/> ; Visby  
<http://www.uu.se/utbildning/utbildningar/selma/program/?pKod=HLA1K> ; MLA  
<http://mla.winchester.ac.uk/>

## Appendix 4. Project information sheet



### Project Information Sheet

‘Liberal Education in Europe: aims, principles and values’  
2015-2018  
by Daniel Kontowski

I am a PhD student at the University of Winchester at the Department of Educational Studies and Liberal Arts. The study you are invited to participate would form a basis of my dissertation that aims to describe and analyse the philosophical dimensions of the liberal (arts) movement in Europe.

#### **About the study:**

The rise of liberal (arts) education programmes and institutions in several European countries over the last three decades has been unprecedented and becomes increasingly important in higher education systems. Other scholars who recently took to study this phenomenon either focussed on particular institutions, which operate rather independently, or focussed on basic organizational characteristics of those programmes and trends in higher education that may have facilitated them. Little is known, however, of what is really behind this name in terms of ideas and motivations. I hope to advance our common knowledge on the topic by providing an inductive analysis of the aims, principles and values behind various instances of the movement.

With more than 183 liberal education institutions worldwide outside the U.S., the time is ripe to undertake a comparative yet philosophical investigation into the ‘heart’ of the movement. You have been identified as one of the selected group of leaders of such institutions that can be critical to conduct such study.

Before you decide to participate, it is important you understand what the study involves and what you would be asked to do. So, please take time to read the following information. And please don’t hesitate to ask me, if anything is unclear.

#### **Participation:**

Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary. Your consent for participation may be withdrawn at any time, without stating a reason nor any repercussions. The recordings and transcripts will be destroyed at any time if the participant would state such request. The participants can request a copy of the recording and will be sent a copy of a transcript.

#### **Procedure:**

Participation in the study would involve two interviews aimed to highlight your personal vision of liberal (arts) education and how it was reflected in the institution you have led/are leading. This would involve questions about the aims, principles and values reflected in various dimensions of the program, discussion of other programmes in Europe and in the U.S., as well as sources of inspiration and institutional and structural forces at play.

The first interview may last between two and four hours, while the second one is considered a follow up session and should not take longer than one and half hours. The second interview should normally take place the next day. Both interviews can be interrupted or cancelled by the participant at any time without reason or penalty. Interviews will be recorded using audio recorder and a smartphone (as backup).

The results will be used principally for my dissertation, which will be submitted in March 2018 at the latest. I also hope to publish some of the partial or final results in peer review academic journals or book chapters as well as present them at academic conferences during my PhD study and after.

After the interviews, the transcripts of the recordings would be produced. Once the participants receive the transcript from the interview, he or she would be allowed to validate it so that the quotes reflect their intentions and opinions. The participant might decide that some parts of the interview are unquotable, since the quotes would be attributable. The validated version is final and will be used for transcription.

If no response is received for an email with a transcript within a month, a reminder would be sent to give you another two weeks for validation. If no response is still received, it is therefore assumed that the participant accepts the original version. This version would be used for analyses for the dissertation and other forms of dissemination.

**Confidentiality:**

Because the study is designed as comparison of easily-identifiable liberal (arts) programmes and institutions and their leaders, it would impossible to keep your identity undisclosed. Both your name, and the name of the program/institution, would appear in the dissertation and other works named in the previous paragraph. Time and place of the interview would also be stated.

All direct quotes from the interview in other forms than a dissertation are permissible only if authorized separately by the participant.

The questions during the interview would deal with your actions as a leader of the relevant liberal (arts) institution and will not touch upon issues unrelated to them. Remember, that you may decline to answer any question. As the study triangulates institutional and interview data it will be mentioned that the interviews reflect personal opinions and not organisational views.

Although the following factors will not normally be of any concern, I am nevertheless obliged to inform all participants that confidentiality and anonymity does not cover disclosure of involvement in any criminal activities. Therefore, research data does not enjoy legal privilege, and might be liable to subpoena by a court. Moreover, there is a legal obligation to report information on acts of terrorism, or suspected financial offences related to terrorism (Terrorism Act 2000), information on money laundering (Proceeds of Crime Act 2002), or on the neglect or abuse of a child (Section 115 of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998). The research student may also seek legal advice or the advice of her supervisors about whether to report other involvement in criminal activities, if these activities were to constitute serious physical or psychological harm to the participant or others.

Data will be stored in accordance with Data Protection Legislation. The interview transcripts will be kept in a secure and locked cabinet and all computer files will be

password protected. Only the research student will have access to the original data. As per Data Protection Legislation 1998, the recordings, transcripts and other data will be kept for no longer than six years.

**Contact for Further Information:**

If you have any questions or require more information about the study, you can contact the principal investigator at any time through:

[D.Kontowski.15@unimail.winchester.ac.uk](mailto:D.Kontowski.15@unimail.winchester.ac.uk)

If you have inquiries or problems with the study which you do not want to discuss with the research student, please contact Dr Thomas Nørgaard (2<sup>nd</sup> supervisor, University of Winchester):

[Thomas.Norgaard@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:Thomas.Norgaard@winchester.ac.uk)

**Ethics approval:**

This study has been approved of by the University RKE Ethics Committee at the University of Winchester in May 2016.

**Permission of gatekeepers:**

If the interview does not take place at the University of Winchester, the manager of the setting or the owner of the premise needs to provide written permission. This person also will be provided with an information sheet and be asked to sign a consent form (consenting to the research taking place in the setting).

**Further issues:**

If you believe there are issues with the study design, ethics and confidentiality, you can contact the Principal Investigator or Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee Chair at the University of Winchester, dr Maru Mormina ([Maru.Mormina@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:Maru.Mormina@winchester.ac.uk)).

(Daniel Kontowski)

last updated: May 2016

**Appendix 5. Consent form**



‘Liberal Education in Europe: aims, principles and values’

2015-2018

by Daniel Kontowski

**Consent Form**

I have read (*or had clearly explained to me*) and understood the information about the project. I understand that my participation in this project is completely voluntary, and that I may withdraw at any time during the project, without penalty.

I understand the arrangements that have been made to ensure my anonymity and privacy. I am aware that I have the right to see what has been written about me.

The researcher has made clear to me any risks which may be involved in my participation in the project.

The arrangements for secure storage of data, and for its eventual disposal, have been explained to me

On this basis, I consent to take part in the project

PRINT NAME .....

TELEPHONE NUMBER .....

EMAIL .....

Signed. .... Date.....

## Appendix 6. Initial topic guide

### Investigating the (potential) diversity of aims, principles and values in European Liberal Education

#### Objectives:

- To reconstruct the history behind major developments in European Liberal Education
- To reconstruct personal vision of liberal education that was held by most influential leaders
- To understand the ways of conceptual and practical differentiating between liberal and non-liberal education
- To investigate the reasons for the choice of 'liberal education' label for their particular innovations
- To represent the opinions of the leaders on other developments in liberal education, current trends and possible future

#### Introduction:

- Motivation behind the research (deductive-inductive), recording and conditions of confidentiality, timing (ca. 180 minutes); short break after 1:30, first part
- Rules of a 'taboo game': 'liberal arts', 'liberal arts and sciences', 'liberal education' banned until the second part

#### **PART 1 – the direct part**

##### 1. Introducing oneself and the institution

How did you get into becoming a professor?

What was your career path, very briefly?

Could you reconstruct for me the history behind the idea and implementation of your program/institution?

Was it the first attempt in this direction?

Why did you want to do this?

Who was critical to achieve that?

What were the supporting reactions?

What were the most radical reactions?

How democratically was it introduced/accepted?

Why at that moment in time?

##### 2. To understand aims

What did you hope to achieve? Organizationally, Pedagogically, Civically/Socially, Economically?

How was that different from 'normal' programs?

Did you get there? What were the obstacles?

##### 3. To understand principles

What did you introduce in your programme to make it?

How was that different from 'normal' programs?

What was common in your programme over time?

What changed and why?

'Stripping exercise':

- Organization – institution
- Organization – own teachers
- Curriculum – area

- Curriculum - electives
- Curriculum – pedagogy
- Students – international
- Students – selected

#### 4. Values

What is a good student?

What is a good teacher?

What is a good class?

[focus on differences; maybe more of a ‘dream’ studying]

BREAK (5-10 mins)

### **Part 2 – the indirect/reflection/validation part**

Focus on differences, speaking on others, evaluation

Wider reflection on the difference:

What do you think is the major difference between your programme and other ELEs:

- In your country
- In other European countries?
- In the US?

#### **Is there anything unique in your program?**

Is it for everybody? Who should pay for this? Should it be debt-free?

Do you think there are any programmes that are not really liberal education? Why?

Who did you have contact with among ELEs? When? What for?

Do you recall any ELE programme that failed?

\*

Do you agree that your programme:

- Introduces broad/interdisciplinary education
- Is elite/selective
- Was founded on US inspiration
- Benefitted from US funding
- Benefitted from the Bologna Process
- Helps students obtain 21st century/transdisciplinary/general skills to excel in the knowledge economy?
- Is practical education? Can at the same have vocational aims?

Label

did you consider calling it differently? If so, how?

what are the benefits of speaking of ‘liberal education’?

Would you call liberal arts, liberal education, or even differently?

Dynamics

Were there others who tried to do this at the time of your program?

Who was doing it right?

Who was wrong and why?

Why do you think it survived?

Was the government supportive? Other HEIs (including your institution)?

Were you aware of any network or events for liberal education in Europe? Did you take part in

that?

\*

Do you think you could do this again now?

How many programmes of liberal education are there in Europe?

Would there be much more? why?

What are your hopes for the program?

If you could change one thing about liberal education in Europe, what would it be?



## Appendix 7. Details of interviews conducted

| #            | original interview and transcript |                          |            |              |               |        |               | final transcript |               |               |               | reaction          |           |
|--------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------|------------|--------------|---------------|--------|---------------|------------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|-------------------|-----------|
|              | first name                        | last name                | date       | hour started | time recorded | breaks | wordcount)    | words / minute   | date approved | words         | % of original | degree of changes | received  |
| 1            | Hans                              | Adriaansens              | 14.06.2016 | 11:00        | 03:15:00      | 1      | 15478         | 1905             | 29.01.2018    | 12408         | 80%           | moderate          | June 2018 |
| 2            | Thomas                            | Nørgaard                 | 18.08.2016 | 11:38        | 02:59:00      | 3      | 20392         | 2734             | 07.03.2018    | 20282         | 99%           | minor             | May 2018  |
| 3            | Samuel                            | Abrahám                  | 08.09.2016 | 12:30        | 01:34:00      | 1      | 11011         | 2811             | 12.02.2018    | 9597          | 87%           | moderate          | June 2018 |
| 4            | Anatoli                           | Mikhailov <sup>176</sup> | 13.09.2016 | 12:15        | 00:32:00      | 1      | 3756          | 2817             | 01.02.2018    | 2828          | 75%           | major             | June 2018 |
|              | Ryhor                             | Miniankou                |            | 13:00        | 01:22:00      | -      | 7304          | 2138             | 24.01.2018    | 7358          | 101%          | minor             |           |
| 5            | Leif                              | Borgerth                 | 22.09.2016 | 15:20        | 02:35:00      | -      | 12809         | 1983             | 25.01.2018    | 13812         | 108%          | minor             | May 2018  |
| 6            | Nigel                             | Tubbs                    | 23.09.2016 | 13:30        | 02:15:00      | 1      | 17248         | 3066             | 02.02.2018    | 15977         | 93%           | moderate          | May 2018  |
| 7            | Nikolay                           | Koposov                  | 10.01.2017 | 14:30        | 00:35:00      | 3      | 26957         | 2941             | 15.03.2018    | 24691         | 92%           | moderate          | June 2018 |
|              | Nikolay                           | Koposov                  | 11.01.2017 | 14:25        | 03:05:00      | 2      |               |                  |               |               |               |                   |           |
|              | Dina                              | Khapaeva                 | 10.01.2017 | 15:50        | 01:40:00      | 4      | 10020         | 2405             | 27.02.2018    | 9650          | 96%           | moderate          | June 2018 |
| 8            | Jerzy                             | Axer                     | 14.01.2017 | 13:20        | 03:30:00      | 1      | 33168         | 2527             | --177         | 33168         | 100%          | -                 | May 2018  |
|              | Jerzy                             | Axer                     | 21.01.2017 | 14:00        | 01:45:00      | -      |               |                  |               |               |               |                   |           |
| <b>TOTAL</b> |                                   |                          |            |              |               |        | <b>158143</b> |                  |               | <b>149771</b> | <b>93%</b>    |                   |           |

<sup>176</sup> Apart from the interview, AM provided 500 words of short answers to 12 specific follow-up questions, received 5.06.2018.

<sup>177</sup> The transcript has been read but never corrected. The interview was conducted in Polish. The section based on the interview has been read, corrected, and approved in May 2018.

## Appendix 8. Coding framework and distribution of codes

Personality (in NVIVO: 'individual' main category) included the following categories.

- Personal background – passages related to history of the leader before the introduction of liberal education program/institution, ranging from 3 (NT) to 12 (JA);
- Motivation to engage – passages discussing factors that directly influenced a decision to engage at the time of preparation/inception, ranging from 0 (NT) to 11 (JA);
- Historical inspiration – passages discussing past institutional practices or intellectual works that leaders referenced/discussed as the source of their inspiration, ranging from 0 (NK, SA) to 14 (JA); if the category would be split into practices and texts, the first would clearly dominate;
- Label – leaders' opinions on the label they used to reference their innovation, ranging from 1 (NK)<sup>178</sup> to 9 (TN). A decision to include it was considered part of personal preferences of the leader, which turned out only partially true;
- Evaluation-reflection – (current) opinion of the leader on the development of the program(s) since inception, ranging from 2 (SA) to 21 (JA);
- Future of liberal education in Europe – leaders' opinions on the future developments in European liberal education, ranging from 0 (LB) to 4 (JA). This category was built around the question in the topic guide that did not attract much attention of the leaders who seem primarily preoccupied with the current situation.
- Other – residual category.

Politics (in NVIVO: 'influences' main category) included following categories:

- Historical-social forces – passages referencing structural and institutional factors in the past that they considered to be relevant for the introduction of liberal education in their country/institution, either as continuation or as an opposing force to those large-scale forces. This category ranged from 0 (HA) to 21 (JA) with a clear pattern showing that Eastern European leaders devoted more attention to discuss those.
- University-level influences – passages discussing the influences of the university on the programme and the programme on the university. Private institution leaders (TN, SA, AM) ranged from 0 to 2, while public institutions leaders have obviously more to say about that, ranging from 5 (LB) to 14 (NT), with JA (47) as a clear outlier due to his multiple institutions that are in institutional symbiosis with the big university, the length of the interview and likely my long acquaintance with those arrangements.
- Policy level influences – passages discussing the role of national policies (with the Bologna Process as enacted at national level), and the role of the context of other

<sup>178</sup> Despite being a single code, the relevant passage took over 3 pages of transcript.

higher education institutions in the country. This category ranged from 4 (NK) to 17 (JA), with no clear public-private pattern.

- International influences – passages related to the role of international institutions and sponsors on the inception of the program, as well its current operation, with two exceptions: past inspirations and opinion on other liberal education institutions in Europe. This category ranged from 5 (NT) to 20 (JA), with the leaders collaborating with Bard College or Endeavor Foundation taking all four highest numbers.
- Relation to other institutions – passages where a leader discusses other liberal education institutions, named or not, that are still in operation. This category ranged from 0 (NK)<sup>179</sup> to 13 (HA).
- Promoting liberal education – passages discussing how the liberal education was promoted in their case and how it should be currently promoted, including a discussion about open days etc., ranging from 2 (AM, NK) to 10 (JA).
- Institutional dynamics – passages discussing how the institution has changed since inception (does not include quotes about a new institution), ranging from 0 (HA) to 22 (JA). There was some overlap with evaluation-reflection, but this category was focussed more on institutional changes and less on how the leader feels about the changes.
- Other – residual category.

Practice (in NVIVO: 'organisation' main category) included the following categories:

- Curriculum – passages discussing the content and principle of the programme of studies, or classes offered if no degree is granted, ranging from 5 (HA, NK) to 23 (TN).
- Pedagogy – passages on the methods of teaching and learning, including 'tutoring' (JA) where no classes were offered, ranging from 1 (HA) to 17 (TN).
- Community – passages on the size of the program, extracurriculars (including civic engagement activities), residential component, and relations sought among and between students and teachers, ranging from 4 (AM, LB, NK, NT, SA) to 15-16 (TN, JA).
- Organisational structure – passages dealing with the structure of the institution, institutional culture, and delegation of powers, ranging from 2 (LB) to 8 (TN).

<sup>179</sup> Possible error.

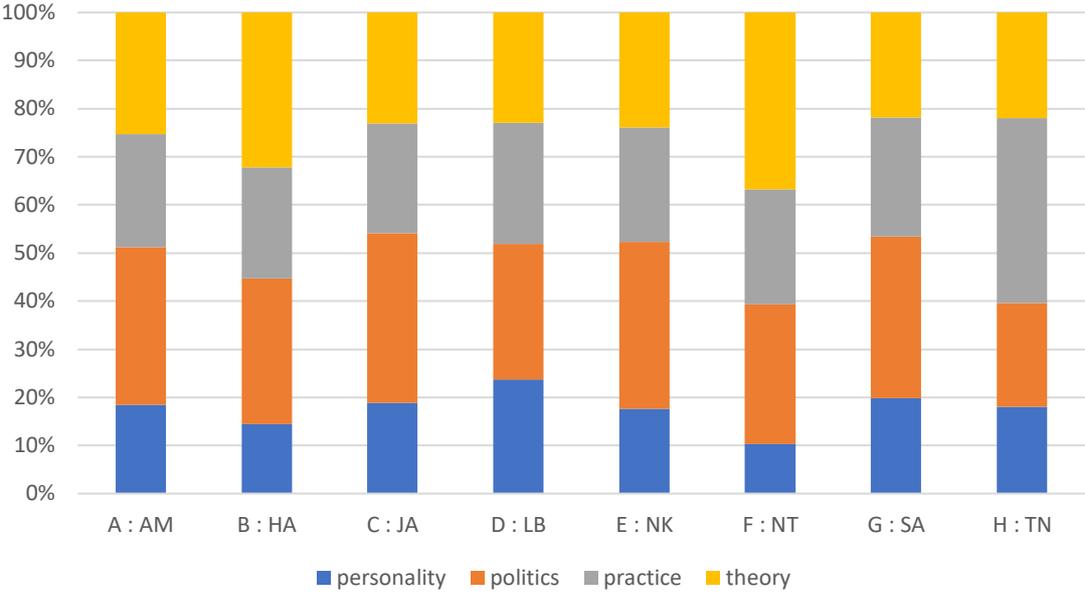
- Physical space – passages on the role of the physical environment of the institution in learning, ranging from 0 (JA, NT) to 3 (LB).
- Faculty – passages on the role of faculty, hiring decisions, and qualities sought from people involved to collaborate in the project as teachers, ranging from 1 (NT) to 21 (JA).
- Language – passages discussing the role of the language of instruction, from 0 (AM, NK, TN) to 2 (HA, JA),
- Tuition – discussion of the role of tuition fees, ranging from 0 (AM, LB, NK, SA) to 5 (JA).
- Other- residual category.

Theory (in NVIVO: ‘theory’ main category) included the following categories:

- What is liberal education – passages containing direct and indirect answers to the question of what liberal education is, a category with big overlaps but distinguished by a clear intention of the leader to link particular statements with their understanding of the concept. Ranging from 3 (NK) to 30 (TN).
- Programme aims – goals that the leaders set for the program, either external or internal to the learning situation, ranging from 3 (SA) to 33 (JA).
- Target group – passages discussing students (or other groups) that the liberal education innovation is hoping to engage, ranging from 4 (AM, LB, SA) to 29 (JA). This category often also discussed the qualities of the students that would be developed through the study.
- Alumni – passages about the future paths of the alumni, ranging from 1 (TN, LB) to 9 (HA).
- Employability/Practicality – passages dealing with the relation of liberal education that is said to skew on the theoretical side, to the job market considerations. Some leaders have managed to present the case for their education to be practical without the direct employability component. Ranging from 2 (JA, SA, TN) to 6 (LB).
- Other – residual category.

The figure below shows the share of coded passages by main category.

Share of nodes by main category



The table below shows the distribution of over 1400 codes across all subcategories.

|                                     |      |    |
|-------------------------------------|------|----|
| 1 : 1.1 personal background         | 43   | 3% |
| 2 : 1.2 motivation to engage        | 43   | 3% |
| 3 : 1.3 inspirations (history)      | 33   | 2% |
| 4 : 1.4 label                       | 35   | 2% |
| 5 : 1.5 evaluation-reflection       | 64   | 4% |
| 6 : 1.6. future of LA in Europe     | 14   | 1% |
| 7 : Individual - other              | 29   | 2% |
| 8 : 2.0 historical social forces    | 50   | 3% |
| 9 : 2.1 university level influences | 86   | 6% |
| 10 : 2.2 policy level influences    | 58   | 4% |
| 11 : 2.3 international influences   | 84   | 6% |
| 12 : 2.4 relation to ELAIs          | 53   | 4% |
| 13 : 2.5 promoting LA               | 46   | 3% |
| 14 : 2.6 institutional dynamics     | 48   | 3% |
| 15 : Influences - other             | 28   | 2% |
| 16 : 3.1 curriculum                 | 87   | 6% |
| 17 : 3.2 pedagogy                   | 54   | 4% |
| 18 : 3.3 community-size, res, extra | 61   | 4% |
| 19 : 3.4 organisational structure   | 35   | 2% |
| 20 : 3.5 physical space             | 11   | 1% |
| 21 : 3.6 faculty                    | 59   | 4% |
| 22 : 3.7 language                   | 7    | 0% |
| 23 : 3.8 tuition                    | 13   | 1% |
| 24 : organisation-other             | 58   | 4% |
| 25 : 4.0 what is LE                 | 118  | 8% |
| 26 : 4.1 programme aims             | 94   | 6% |
| 27 : 4.2 target group               | 82   | 6% |
| 28 : 4.3 research                   | 24   | 2% |
| 29 : 4.4 alumni                     | 26   | 2% |
| 30 : 4.5 employment-practicism      | 23   | 2% |
| 31 : Theory - other                 | 7    | 0% |
|                                     | 1473 |    |

Lastly, below is a detailed matrix of codes across leaders and subcategories (codes with 4 or more passages per leader marked in green).

|                                     | A :<br>AM | B :<br>HA | C :<br>JA | D :<br>LB | E :<br>NK | F :<br>NT | G :<br>SA | H :<br>TN |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----|
| 1 : 1.1 personal background         | 3         | 4         | 12        | 7         | 3         | 3         | 5         | 6         | 43  |
| 2 : 1.2 motivation to engage        | 5         | 5         | 11        | 5         | 5         | 0         | 5         | 7         | 43  |
| 3 : 1.3 inspirations (history)      | 3         | 2         | 14        | 3         | 0         | 3         | 0         | 8         | 33  |
| 4 : 1.4 label                       | 4         | 2         | 5         | 6         | 1         | 4         | 4         | 9         | 35  |
| 5 : 1.5 evaluation-reflection       | 3         | 7         | 21        | 8         | 10        | 4         | 2         | 9         | 64  |
| 6 : 1.6. future of LA in Europe     | 2         | 1         | 4         | 0         | 1         | 1         | 3         | 2         | 14  |
| 7 : Individual - other              | 2         | 1         | 14        | 2         | 3         | 1         | 1         | 5         | 29  |
| 8 : 2.0 historical social forces    | 8         | 0         | 26        | 1         | 9         | 1         | 3         | 2         | 50  |
| 9 : 2.1 university level influences | 2         | 8         | 47        | 5         | 9         | 14        | 0         | 1         | 86  |
| 10 : 2.2 policy level influences    | 5         | 6         | 17        | 6         | 4         | 4         | 8         | 8         | 58  |
| 11 : 2.3 international influences   | 8         | 4         | 20        | 9         | 13        | 5         | 10        | 15        | 84  |
| 12 : 2.4 relation to ELAIs          | 5         | 13        | 4         | 5         | 0         | 10        | 4         | 12        | 53  |
| 13 : 2.5 promoting LA               | 2         | 8         | 10        | 7         | 2         | 5         | 5         | 7         | 46  |
| 14 : 2.6 institutional dynamics     | 4         | 0         | 22        | 3         | 7         | 3         | 2         | 7         | 48  |
| 15 : Influences - other             | 5         | 7         | 6         | 1         | 1         | 3         | 2         | 3         | 28  |
| 16 : 3.1 curriculum                 | 13        | 5         | 13        | 10        | 5         | 11        | 7         | 23        | 87  |
| 17 : 3.2 pedagogy                   | 3         | 1         | 15        | 5         | 3         | 6         | 4         | 17        | 54  |
| 18 : 3.3 community-size, res, extra | 4         | 10        | 16        | 4         | 4         | 4         | 4         | 15        | 61  |
| 19 : 3.4 organisational structure   | 3         | 6         | 4         | 2         | 5         | 4         | 3         | 8         | 35  |
| 20 : 3.5 physical space             | 1         | 1         | 0         | 3         | 2         | 0         | 2         | 2         | 11  |
| 21 : 3.6 faculty                    | 2         | 4         | 21        | 7         | 4         | 1         | 3         | 17        | 59  |
| 22 : 3.7 language                   | 0         | 2         | 2         | 1         | 0         | 1         | 1         | 0         | 7   |
| 23 : 3.8 tuition                    | 0         | 2         | 5         | 0         | 0         | 4         | 0         | 2         | 13  |
| 24 : organisation-other             | 2         | 4         | 22        | 1         | 8         | 6         | 1         | 14        | 58  |
| 25 : 4.0 what is LE                 | 6         | 11        | 24        | 10        | 3         | 23        | 11        | 30        | 118 |
| 26 : 4.1 programme aims             | 12        | 13        | 33        | 7         | 10        | 7         | 3         | 9         | 94  |
| 27 : 4.2 target group               | 4         | 9         | 29        | 4         | 6         | 15        | 4         | 11        | 82  |
| 28 : 4.3 research                   | 3         | 1         | 8         | 1         | 7         | 1         | 0         | 3         | 24  |
| 29 : 4.4 alumni                     | 2         | 9         | 3         | 1         | 3         | 5         | 2         | 1         | 26  |
| 30 : 4.5 employment-practicism      | 3         | 3         | 2         | 6         | 2         | 3         | 2         | 2         | 23  |
| 31 : Theory - other                 | 0         | 3         | 0         | 1         | 0         | 3         | 0         | 0         | 7   |
|                                     | 119       | 152       | 430       | 131       | 130       | 155       | 101       | 255       |     |

## Appendix 9. Template instruction accompanying the transcript

### How the document has been produced

The transcripts have been conducted verbatim, with additional notes for emphases (CAPITAL LETTERS), pauses (-, --, ...), direct speech ('...') and tone and non-verbal communication etc. (laughing) to allow for processing in Qualitative Data Analysis software. All false starts have been removed, missing words added in brackets, and paragraphs were added for clarity and the ease of read. I removed passages referring to the break arrangements, interruptions, phone calls, and other things not pertaining to the matter of the interview. Otherwise the transcript follows what has been said during the interview. I hope that you are going to enjoy reading the record of our conversation about your idea of liberal arts education.

### Could I please ask you to do the following:

- 1) First, please, check the transcript carefully. While much effort has been put to make it as consistent as possible, it cannot be ruled out that some of my additions in square brackets might be different from your intentions. It would be very helpful if you could make any other potential changes in the track changes mode or as responses to words comments.
- 2) Second, the word comments that you see might point to passages:
  - a) where I was unsure about the meaning, or
  - b) where contextual information (names, titles, short bios, translation) was necessary to understand a sentence, or
  - c) where contextual fact checking has unearthed potentially contradictory a differing information.

Please review them and answer in comments if you do not agree.

- 3) Third, I also made few short follow-up questions in the comments: they either ask for additional documents, if possible, or for a further clarification of your position on some important issue. This is the most important part of the checking process for the quality of my dissertation. It would be most helpful if you can take time to answer them directly in the file and/or provide the documents along with the transcript. If you have second thoughts or feel the need to say more, feel free to add additional comments where you would like to clarify your position or add new materials.
- 4) Four, I would like to ask you to provide me with:
  - documents you have mentioned in the interview:
    - o Listing documents here
  - the most current version of your CV/publications to better understand your professional trajectory and academic interests.

If there are any other documents that you would like to share with me for the PhD purposes only (articles by you or others, institutional materials etc.), please send them along with the transcript and specify how can those be used.

- 5) Five, finally, if you decide something that you said was off the record, please make clear if you would like to include it by an appropriate comment marking the whole passage you wish struck out. I decided not to do it myself as I want this to be your conscious decision that I will obviously honor.

I know this might seem like a lot of work, but please be reminded that comprehensive information will allow me to write the best possible version of my dissertation. In exchange for detailed authorization process for transcripts, I surrender the plan to further ask you for a separate follow up interview. If there are any outstanding or new questions, I would send them in Q1 2018.

## Appendix 10. Memo on initial motivation and goals for the study

The following note has been written in early 2016. Included here 'as is'.

### What brought me to this study?

I believe that liberal (arts) education is a valuable addition to existing models of university studies in Europe. It helps overcome pre-mature specialization, choices made based on assumptions or suggestions rather than experience, and arbitrary disciplinary boundaries. It is critical in creating agency of a student, taking up responsibility and freedom for the studies, following one's own interests and mindfully relating to others. I would certainly be a different person if I did not attend one myself.

Students in liberal education programmes (in Europe) tend to relate to the formula of studies in quite personal way. They are rather reluctant to see themselves as educational customers, despite the suggestive metaphors behind introducing eligibility of courses. They must have been a little brave to attend them, just as were the leaders and teachers. Liberal education allows for *Bildung*, for developing a mental picture of oneself and becoming this person, rather than Matrix-like *Ausbildung*, where we are just 'programmed' to achieve some useful learning outcomes. It allows for failure. When done well, it is also more demanding, more holistic, and had a lasting formative effect on a student, even if this effect might not be easy to measure. When done less well, it is just (more) liberal organization of studies. But in both cases, the students might benefit enormously from such form of education.

There is little understanding (not to mention agreement) as to what exactly (should) happen in a liberal education programme in Europe these days. Authors dealing with the topic before can be typically classified in two categories: practitioners describing their own programs, and comparative higher education scholars describing a new trend happening across Europe. None of them were interested particularly in diversity of those programs, especially as this might have been seen as providing arguments to the detractors of the idea. It would also make evaluative studies – those focussing on the gap between promise and practice in particular programmes – a logical next step, which might be hurtful for some.

Reading those works might lead to an impression that there are just 'small' curricular and organizational difference, but the idea – what is hoped to be achieved through such an education and why – is generally common.

History of liberal education shows the dynamics and diversity, with accommodations to changing context (national and historical). Diversity in the past was quite normal, but at the same time, lead to a question of the basis of classification and validity of labelling particular forms as such. There are generally two ways of dealing with that:

- theory of family resemblance (there is a number of concepts that are part of the idea, which is valid even if not a single programme have them all),
- theory of essentially contested concept (claiming that there neither was, nor is a consensus on what is liberal education, but it is a proxy that help us create a discussion in the contested area that we care for).

I wanted to focus on the leaders, because there is a strong discourse in mission statements, especially those written in English, so they are of limited use for learning about the true idea behind the program. I find them fascinating and inspiring, and I think others might share this impression. I also tend to believe that they have something relevant in common, which is precious: I would call it a vision and academic courage. Even if they wanted different things, they all achieved them, in one way or the other, but there are little sources available on academic leadership, especially from Europe. I also want to write something critical, informed but going over platitudes, *Festschrifts* and gratitude. There is certainly a part of the history that deals with failure and challenge, the one that we might learn much from, and nobody else can be trusted

to do it if not me.

There is also a part of me that hopes that being the first person to write a serious, useful book on liberal education in Europe would help me establish myself as an expert in the field. This should help me in both further research (teams) and consulting, if I decide to pick up on this role in life. My hope is that my book might be read with interest by many educators, or educational journalists, and serve as a both shortcut to learning about different emerging traditions of European liberal education, and the choices that have been made in the past – and will be in the future. If somebody would want to establish a new liberal education programme in Europe, I hope she or he would look up my book for inspiration, advise and overview of existing programs. Some part of my book should therefore have visual component.

Finally, next year marks 10 years since I was admitted (second last spot) for a liberal education program. I never paid for it, I learned more about myself than about other things during my time there. I also saw numerous shortcomings, conscious or not, to the delivery of this program. As I would like to see those programmes flourishing in the future, and hopefully changing the educational landscape for generation of my children, what better I can do as an aspiring scholar than to conduct a study and share my results? This is probably the most important debt that I have, and at the same time, the most obvious one to pay back with my education. If being a leader is helping other people succeed in a field that you professionally care for, making a convincing study might be the best step in this direction.

#### **What is my contribution?**

What exactly is my academic claim to fame? Probably answering to some of those questions:

- travel of ideas, push and pull factors, what do they have in common (if any), WHY?, funding, inspiration, diversity?
- and what difference will it make? why is it not just you affected?
- how change happens in HE (which is very traditional and static)?
- how do new ideas fight with the mainstream? how do innovation take place really? what discourses are employed, who are the stakeholders?
- how will it alter the viewpoint we already have?
- studies in liberal education, a springboard for, caveats, comparative quantitative studies, evaluative studies, starting point for the future of education?
- mainstreaming LE for students, parents, leaders and policy makers?
- helping LE institutions by generating more awareness, and then demand.

#### **What are my assumptions?**

##### **GENERAL**

1. European liberal education is diverse
2. diversity in terms of different ideas have not been properly addressed, as it is reflected in aims, principles, and values
3. we have surprisingly small amount of data on the above, as well as actual practice of European liberal education programs
4. the practice of liberal education might be led by conflicting ideas
5. such diversity does not have to be a bad thing
6. To answer this question, one has to combine insights from:
  - a. Philosophy / history of ideas
  - b. Sociology of education (qualitative interviews with leaders)
  - c. Higher education studies
7. Tradition and organization of the systems was just as important as the role of leaders in why some countries are now better represented on the map than others

## UNDERSTANDING

8. The 'common core' might be surprisingly empty:
  - a. Name
  - b. Alternative organisation than disciplinary university studies
9. There are different understandings of 'liberal' and 'education', due to organizational, national and philosophical contexts
10. It is not an accident that the programmes used the label of 'liberal education' in 1990s and 2000s, rather than any other, e.g.:
  - a. Prestige of the US higher education after the end of Cold War
  - b. US Funding
  - c. US inspirations
  - d. Visibly different philosophy/model of education
11. It might be hard to call it a 'movement'
12. There might be perfectly 'liberal education' programmes that do not refer to themselves in this way
13. Perhaps it was internal innovation, which typically happens in the background of universities
14. Existing comparative studies are deductive rather than inductive
15. Practices were not based on a (common) theory of liberal education
16. The role of Bologna process in ELE is not consistent; long coming
17. To date, not a single country introduced a national policy for liberal education (despite calls from IMF, OECD, EC etc.)
18. Lack of pan-European network has to do with different aims of those programs, as well as national organizational differences and the role of strong leaders

## LEADERS

19. The leaders of those programmes were surprisingly similar:
  - a. socio-demographics,
  - b. international exposition
  - c. prestige and influence
  - d. team-building skills
  - e. non-cooperating with other leaders
  - f. efficiency in introducing lasting change
20. The leaders might start thinking in 'legacy mode', it is a transitory moment for much of European liberal education; warm sociology is getting cold

## FUTURE

21. Further growth in the number of ELEs might be accompanied by market building (some programmes becoming more influential, popular, others being refused the status, cooperation, coalitions, lobbying at the EU level etc.)
22. The number of students interested might have been even bigger if the institutions were better promoting and networking

We know surprisingly little about the students, especially besides their graduate programs. Why did they choose this studies? How did it help them? In what dimensions are they different from their colleagues from other programs?