

**Practical preparation for a life of good  
citizenship or just a waste of time?  
A study of student engagement with the  
American liberal arts curriculum at an  
international university in London**

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I, Allison Cole-Stutz, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

This body of work would not have been possible without the good will, eagerness and energy of a small group of RAIUL's student leaders who graciously gave their time and support to my research. Ultimately, however, this work is dedicated to my four biggest supporters: Violet, Hazel and Chris who cheered me on even when I wouldn't listen and to my mum who lovingly pushed me to carry on every step of the way. With your support, I got there in the end and I am so grateful.

## Reflective Statement

The EdD International course has as its mission to 'extend the professional expertise' of practitioners involved in the field of international education and give them the tools to question and research attitudes and practices that impact learning at their institutions'. My experience throughout the coursework at the Institute has given me: exposure to professional colleagues with many different perspectives and experiences from my own, research skills that have helped me to question practices and programmes at my home institution and a wider vision of how I, as a professional, go about my daily work.

Specifically, the coursework has given me opportunities to look at models and theories that directly relate to educational practices that I am involved in every day at my institution and to consider how changes might impact students and affect outcomes. My studies in the four taught courses considered: commodification and consumerism, values and attitudes toward general education in relation to student retention, and the idea of global citizenship and how this evolves through the student experience.

The research skills I have gained throughout the taught courses, i.e. strategies for developing a research question, consideration for different methodologies and ways of collecting data and analyzing outcomes have all helped me to identify and expose patterns in data that call for a closer look at programme development. This, in turn, has given me further insight into the student experience at the institution where I work and has also helped me to make the connection between the mission of the institution and how this plays out in the lives of students particularly in their first year of study.

Richmond, the American International University in London is a small institution of higher education accredited both in America and in Britain. Richmond has a very international student population with over 100 nationalities represented with both undergraduate and postgraduate degree courses taught in the American liberal arts tradition.

Richmond's mission is to "...prepare to graduate students who possess a world perspective and awareness that includes an understanding of cultural distinctions. An internationally minded faculty encourages the ability to communicate effectively so that graduates are well positioned to assume leadership responsibilities in careers in which issues with global implications are addressed." (2011)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.richmond.ac.uk](http://www.richmond.ac.uk)

Richmond's curriculum, not unlike other liberal arts institutions, seeks to attract students who understand the importance of a general course of study that allows for the development of skills while coursework includes art, science, language, history, philosophy and more. The mission can be seen both as a marketing statement to attract new students or 'consumers' to take part in an international-style programme with outlets to careers in leadership and as an educational mission that is the foundation of the student experience at the University. Difficulties arise, however, when the perceptions of what is needed to fulfill the mission do not align with the programmes. Programme changes, adjustments to curriculum and changes in teaching methodologies have all come under the sharp scrutiny of university faculty and administrators with concerns that HE institutions are no longer in the business of teaching, but are rather simply trying to keep a foot in the marketplace where consumers are making market-driven decisions about which institution to attend. In the first taught course, Foundations of Professionalism, I investigated how students navigate the market place of higher education and make choices about institutions by commodifying universities' services and academic offerings. Commodification, in turn, has led to much concern about the strategic planning of HE institutions and how much control rests in the hands of the consumer versus how much control is given to those creating and implementing the institutions' missions.

Of course, the perception of 'student as consumer or customer' is one that raises the hackles of many an academic, but it is a concept that has taken shape (most notably in Britain, but also in many of the other countries represented in the EdD International programme) over the last year. Tuition increases, downsizing of programmes and services and widening access to students who were previously not included in typical undergraduate offerings have all given rise to students who measure all parts of the student experience at their chosen institution and make demands when they feel their expectations are not being met. All of these changes have also led to questions of the ultimate use and value of higher education--whether this can be found in the elements of training a work force or in educating individuals to increase their own competencies or opportunities.

At my own institution, I have had the opportunity to consider programmes that appear to draw in a significant number of students, specifically: the first year program and career/leadership development within the first and second year, work placements and internships, service learning and volunteerism and programmes that hinge on diversity and

cross cultural education. By looking at these programs and services from the student/consumer perspective, I have tried to make the link between students' wants and needs and the mission of the institution. This link is, of course, vital to assessing the value of student programmes and understanding student retention, which has often been quite poor at Richmond, especially within the first year of study at the University.<sup>2</sup>

### Methods of Enquiry 1 & 2

Following on from my study of consumerism and the commodification of the student experience, I designed a research study to investigate students' perceived value of a general, liberal arts education and with this their ability to persist through the first year of study at an international university. This research design combined qualitative and quantitative research in a mixed methods design aimed at identifying a possible connection between the value and understanding of the importance of a liberal arts education and student retention through the programme. This study questioned students' initial reasons for choosing the institution, their perceptions of how the programs (particularly in the first year) were helping them to develop useful or important skills and how they were developing these skills by participating in co-curricular programmes designed to help them reach their goals.

The skills that were identified as useful or important to students by the surveys and interviews in the study were those that are considered part of the liberal arts tradition: self-reliance, problem solving, strategic thinking, team work, tolerance for ambiguity and cross-cultural sensitivity. Not surprisingly, students who identified these skills as important and were also working actively toward cultivating them, rated their student experience in the first year quite highly.

### Specialist Course in International Education

The Specialist Course in International Education gave me the opportunity to better understand one of the intended goals of a liberal arts education—that is to develop global citizens. The idea of global citizenship lends itself well to some of the more tangible skill development that takes place in general education courses which I researched in the Methods of Enquiry 2 course: critical thinking, tolerance for ambiguity, cultural awareness and the development of leadership skills, but how these skills are honed, developed and later used is often questioned.

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<sup>2</sup> Richmond's retention rate has been as low as 55% and as high as 74% in the last 10 years.

Richmond's mission claims to 'prepare graduates for careers in leadership with global implications.' This can be seen both as a marketing pitch and as an educational mission that extends to all the policies, programmes and services offered at the University. In considering global citizenship, however, questions of value and tangible skills begin to take shape. What makes a global citizen? Why is global citizenship a valuable outcome of higher education? What useful skills and abilities should we expect global citizens to possess and be able to use? How can we measure whether global citizens are positively impacting their communities? These are all questions that came out of my study and in which I aimed to identify individual skills that institutions believe are integral to the creation of a global citizen. In doing so, I returned to my theory that students who believe in the value of the skills necessary to become a global citizen work at cultivating them and thereby enjoy the intended (and ideally positive) outcomes of their degree course.

#### Closing Remarks

Throughout the four taught courses, I have built on ideas and theories that shape education at my home institution:

1. the struggle between student consumers and educators to create and take part in meaningful degree courses that have at their root the mission to educate and prepare students for life beyond university
2. the questioned and perceived value of degree courses that are modeled on general education and how this relates to student outcomes.
3. the model of global citizenship and its use in fulfilling educational missions and preparing students to meet workforce demands

My research in the next portion of the course, the institutional focused study, will investigate historical data related to retention, specifically in the first year of study at the institution. I will examine withdrawal surveys from 2006 to 2011 and search for patterns and trends that illuminate the ideas and theories that I investigated in the taught courses. Do students perceive their first year at Richmond as important in developing useful skills that will lead them to become global citizens, or is there a disconnection from course work and useful, tangible skills that causes students to leave the institution? In reviewing this data I will attempt to link programmes developed within the last five years and identify the effect these programmes have had on student

retention. In addition, I will consider further potential programmes that could have a positive effect on student retention and progression.

**Abstract:**

The American liberal arts tradition offers students the opportunity to take a broad range of course modules, learn about diverse cultures and take part in programmes and services that expand their ways of thinking and learning. (Carnegie, 2018) A liberal arts education claims its ultimate goal is to develop the individual to play an active role in his/her local and global community by teaching global citizenship and motivating graduates to continue a life of learning (AACU, 2019). This study considers a first-year cohort of international students entering university for the first time in London. It considers their motivations, expectations and ideas of what a liberal arts education will do for them and how these motivations and expectations develop and change in the first year. This study also focuses on engagement strategies that the institution has developed to promote skill-building and the development of global citizenship and analyses how effective these are in retaining students from year one to year two. Ultimately, the study seeks to discover if a liberal arts education at its early stages does indeed do what its students perceive it to do and whether or not the practicalities of training for good citizenship hold value and meaning to the students taking part on the course.

Liberal arts education has weathered a number of trends in higher education over the years. From a focus on technical training and skills-based learning in the 1980s, to a shift back to personal development in the 1990s, the offer of general education courses has always occupied a place in universities around the world. (Menard, 2010) But as tuition fees increase and demands for student employment also rise, liberal arts programmes seem threatened. Supporters wonder if there is a place for them anymore in preparing young people for life beyond university. (Knight, 2008)

The outcomes of this study are mixed. Based on the students' expectations, feedback, engagement and final evaluations of their first-year programme at Richmond the American International University in London there appear to be two conflicting results. Students who engaged actively and persistently with the programme saw value and use in developing skills and personal qualities that they believed would be useful in helping them achieve their academic and personal goals. Those who did not engage with the programme or engaged only peripherally, saw little value in the first-year experience and struggled to relate to its intended outcomes.

### **Impact Statement:**

The impact of this study is best realised in the value of reconsidering the design of higher education in relationship to how best train and develop graduates of the future. The cost of higher education to the student and the community is high. The return on the investment should then demonstrate the utility of an undergraduate degree. This study suggests that educational opportunities that allow for collaborative inquiry, personal reflection and outlets to consider real world problems can deliver useful transferable skills that help both the individual and the community. The themes of service, lifelong learning, civic engagement and problem solving are woven into the liberal arts curriculum throughout the interdisciplinary course content. These skills can transfer to a number of different professions, but, perhaps most importantly, they can serve to inculcate qualities amongst learners that encourage them to be flexible, adaptable and less fearful of change.

My research into liberal arts education in the UK at the undergraduate level arrives on the heels of a long-standing debate about value for money in higher education. (UK Education Committee, 2018) With the introduction of substantial tuition fees in 2012, the UK university sector has endured more scrutiny surrounding all aspects of the student experience: both academic and non-academic. Internal and external pressures have increased for both public and private universities and questions arise routinely about how best to prepare graduates for entry into the work force and for the inevitable changes ahead. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011) This study, although limited to a single institution, considers questions about the practicalities and value of broad-based, generalised education as it relates to preparation for engagement in a very malleable globalised world. In choosing a degree programme that incorporates a broad foundation of study, do students neglect honing technical skills that will later serve to help them better engage in work within their communities? With technology and innovation driving the market economy, are the technical skills students are learning today within specialised courses at risk of becoming obsolete before graduates reach the job market? Liberal arts graduates who engage actively at the undergraduate level tend to seek out leadership positions and take part in activities that benefit their communities. (Kuh and Kenzie, 2005) They engage actively in seeking out means of improving their lives and the lives of others. The choice of which institution, which degree and which course to enrol on within the constraints of a three or four-year undergraduate degree is a critical decision. With the added concern of student debt and value for money, the ability to separate the practicalities from the niceties is an essential step in finding an undergraduate degree

course that best suits the student. This study considers the students' perception of value and quality when confronted with type of higher education that has largely been criticised for being impractical, but in reconsidering the purpose of an undergraduate degree, it seems the overtly impractical offerings are perhaps the most useful in developing graduates with transferable skills eager to seek and motivate positive changes for themselves and the world around them.

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## **The Study & its Rationale**

At once steeped in heritage and tradition, institutions of higher education are changing. British higher education has a long tradition of offering undergraduate courses with single or joint honours degrees in specialised subject areas. It does not have much of a tradition of broad-based degree programmes. Some changes are beginning to take place at some major universities, however, where liberal arts degrees are being offered, as reported in the New York Times (Guttenplan, 2013). In 2012 UCL launched their Bachelor of Arts and Sciences (BASc) degrees, which their website describes as being ‘at the forefront of the new wave of liberal arts and sciences degrees in the UK’.<sup>3</sup> There are a number of questions about what underlies this new potential trend: what are the motivations and expectations of British universities for offering liberal arts degrees? But there are also questions about the motivations and expectations of those who apply to these degrees, and of the experience of those who enrol on the courses.

This study set out to examine the first year of a four-year American-style liberal arts undergraduate degree programme in London at a small, independent international university. Specifically, it aimed to consider students’ engagement (or disengagement) with the broad curriculum and the support programmes and practices that link the academic programme to the student experience. Initially the study aimed to link students’ interests and motivations toward broad-based study with their perceived practical outcomes—*i.e. do students believe a liberal arts course of study make a graduate a better communicator? A more apt problem solver? generally more employable?* Additionally, the research widened to consider the means of delivering a liberal arts curriculum and how the co-curricular portion of the degree programme drives personal development and employability. Active participation and student engagement were considered both in terms of whether or not students took part, but when they did, how they took part.

Higher education is changing around the world from the types of courses that are being offered to the means by which education is being delivered and, perhaps most notably, the students who now sign on in large numbers to partake in the experience. With a market full of choices, a liberal arts education can appear outwardly more of a nicety than a practical step toward further study or future employment. (Roche, 2010)

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/basc/>

I have spent over twenty-five years in international education both in further and higher educational institutions, so the topic of what and how to teach coupled with how students learn and develop have been areas of considerable interest to me. I earned my first degree at an American liberal arts university in the US. I remember the experience as a whole to be engagingly rich and multi-dimensional both from within the classroom, but also in the ways that the University linked the values and mission of the institution to the course of study. One of the main reasons I carried on into a role in student support was because of my initial experience with a broad-based curriculum.

My role at Richmond the American International University in London is to develop and lead an engaging student experience that combines the students' academic coursework with practical outlets for skill-building that enhance personal development and prepare students for employment or further study post-graduation. In conducting this study as an insider, my aim was both to learn about the student experience on an institutional and personal level, but also to consider the unique assets of a broad-based education and how it ultimately benefits students who engage (or do not) with its many facets.

This mixed methods study will first consider the liberal arts tradition: its history and its development and the changes that have shaped it over a number of years both in an American setting, but also as it has been translated internationally. The focus of a liberal arts education was at once to bridge the gap between academic study and positive, active citizenship by building a platform from which graduates could jettison themselves into careers of meaning and purpose and thereby serve their communities. (Menard, 2010) In this context, this study also considers the perceived purpose(s) of a university education and how students engaged in learning define and hone skills that are elements of good citizenship. The study itself focuses on a small first-year cohort of students at an American international liberal arts university in London. It considers the students' initial motivations, their active involvement in personal development opportunities and questions their understandings of the value and worth of a broad-based curriculum. Elements of student engagement are discussed alongside the programmes designed to promote and develop key transferrable skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving and communication. Finally, a further discussion of new implications for policy and practice are considered with suggested pragmatic adjustments to improve student retention.

## **CHAPTER 1: The Liberal Arts Tradition: The History of Liberal Arts Education & its International Ties**

*'Whatever its future, the free-standing liberal arts college in America has been a study of persistence amid change, continuity amid adaptation.'* (Pfinster, 1984, 147)

The study of liberal arts began in the 12<sup>th</sup> century as a means of educating young men to prepare for lives of service to their community. (Roche, 2010) From the era of Socrates and Plato, education was centred on the trivium of artes liberalis: language, oration and logic. Later the quadrivium of artes mechanicae were added to include geometry, arithmetic, music and astronomy. With a basic knowledge and understanding of these subject areas, it was thought that any free person could build the necessary skill to speak publicly and debate, understand and engage with the legal/governance system and serve his community to his fullest capacity. At the time, these skills were perceived as a very useful means of engaging in public life and supporting the community, but liberal education has had to balance the difficult relationship of teaching a foundation of broad ideas and theories versus teaching specialised, applied skill since its start.

As higher education institutions began to take shape in Europe in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was a call for a new form of humanistic education and the liberal arts curriculum expanded further to include languages, philosophy and history. (Bok, 2013) Liberal arts transitioned to European universities in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and dominated higher education as the means of educating young men to be productive theologians, lawyers and medical doctors. Although the earliest forms of higher education were focused on religious values, as communities evolved and changed, civil service education became an important facet of preparing men for the challenges they were to face in their everyday lives. (Gillard, 1998) Secondary school education eventually took on more of the burden of general education, so European universities became more specialised and opted for professional training as a follow on from the liberal arts curriculum. But as the colonisation of America began, the American university took shape and modelled itself on an English residential teaching facility where arts and sciences were the focus and the development of a foundation of 'superior education' was the key. (Reuben, 1996)

Reuben (1996) has reviewed the history of higher education in America, specifically liberal arts institutions, and noted that in 1636 Harvard College opened its doors as the first institution of higher learning in the new world. Harvard became the training ground for clergymen for the new town, but it would later expand to include professional schools to

educate statesmen, doctors and lawyers amongst other professionals. In the hundred years that followed colleges and universities sprung up all around the New England area including the College of William and Mary (1693), Yale (1701), Princeton (1746), Columbia (1754) and University of Pennsylvania (1755). Immigration was expanding and the colonies were in the midst of big changes. As the revolutionary war began, America was poised to develop its own identity and vision of higher learning. As the settlements expanded across the frontier, so did colleges and universities, but pragmatism was a concern of these institutions from the beginning (Pfinster, 1984). Higher education institutions which were first formed to offer education in God's word now also had to look to the needs of their communities. Not surprisingly, the idea of how to educate young men in 'superior knowledge' was an idea that required modification and adaptation in the 100 years that followed its first introduction.

At the same time, Higher education in England was changing. Oxford and Cambridge, which had dominated English higher education for over 500 years, were seeing students venture to Europe to attend university while the new colleges and universities in America were also luring others away. (Willets, 2017) Although the aim was still primarily to educate the wealthy and well-connected, new curricular changes were afoot with European influencers, notably German higher education institutions, where professionalised studies were becoming more standard than broad-based generalised education. (Fincher, 1989) At the same time higher education in Scotland was flourishing where institutes were not funded by generous endowments but rather tutors were paid for their work and admissions were not exclusive to the privileged. With competition abound, English universities were poised for reform. Secular institutions began to spring up, notably in London, with University College London in 1826 and King's College in 1829 and the creation of the University of London in 1836. The government, not the church or the crown, was involved in reform and Victorian England saw a surge in new universities all around England with a number in industrial cities. With these changes, students became both more numerous and diverse bringing different ideas and challenges with them. Willets (2017) argues that, 'new institutions reflect the values and preoccupations of their time' (36) and indeed changes to curriculum, teaching delivery and the student population also changed with the times.

In America, the liberal arts brought, by necessity, '...vocational and practical arts which prepared young persons to become weavers, blacksmiths, farmers, hunters, navigators, soldiers or doctors.' (Roche, 2010: 5) As the country industrialized and modernised methods of production were introduced, there was a call to establish technical colleges to

run alongside liberal arts institutions so that they could do for 'industrial classes' what liberal arts education had done for 'intellectual classes'. (Pfinster, 1984) While in England, Oxbridge continued to offer prestigious degrees for the wealthy and well-connected, new universities widened their missions to deliver training and education to the meet the needs of the local communities and their economies.

Higher education continued to adapt to its context in America. In 1862, US President Abraham Lincoln supported the creation of institutions of higher learning in agricultural and mechanical arts by donating land to establish these colleges and universities across the nation through the Morrill Act. The Morrill Act enabled the creation of state universities throughout the nation and changed the topography of higher education in America. (Anderson, 1975). The liberal arts college did not disappear, however, it still occupied (and arguably continues to occupy) an important place in American higher education alongside institutions that offer more specialized, vocational courses of study.

In 1828, Yale University issued a report on higher education in America calling for the support of classical education in the midst of fear that higher education was becoming too technical and vocational. The object of the college is 'to lay the foundation of a superior education,' not to support technical outlets for teaching for these 'can never be effectively learned except in the very circumstances in which they are to be practised.' (Herbst, 1828)

Calls for reform in higher education have been continuous and consistent in the history of American higher education. (Gless & Smith, 1992) In the 1920s and 30s amidst financial lows, there was a call to restore 'an integrity and breadth of learning' to American higher education. The great depression took its toll on jobs and infrastructure in America and institutions of higher education were not immune. The 1937 report entitled 'Depression, Recovery & Higher Education' forged a new path, perhaps surprisingly, in support of a foundation of broad-based learning. (Willey, 1937) The teaching of time-specific technical skills had created a workforce able in some areas but not equipped at managing the flexibility and adaptability of the new financial challenges that called for a re-building of the nation. The classical liberal education was returning with some changes. In the 1940s post-war America, higher education institutions opened their doors to servicemen and with the introduction of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, colleges and universities were accommodating an increased enrolment of students with different educational needs and interests. (Abrams, 1989) Widening participation in higher education was beginning to reach beyond the wealthy and well-connected to include students with different

backgrounds and wider demographics. In the 1950s and 60s, there was a call for reform to encourage colleges and universities to become partners in creating active and engaged citizens ready to consider the challenges facing local communities and to work together to offer solutions. In 1960, the then US Senator John F. Kennedy campaigning in Michigan in advance of the presidential election spoke to undergraduate students encouraging them to give themselves to support peace and diplomacy worldwide. 'This University is not maintained by its alumni, or by the state, merely to help its graduates have an economic advantage in the life struggle. There is certainly a greater purpose, and I'm sure you recognize it.' (Kennedy, 1960) In 1961, the Peace Corps was created and has hosted over 220,000 volunteers since its inception.<sup>4</sup>

Harvard historian, Julie Reuben(1996), recounts the late 60s and early 70s as a period of student rebellion on US campuses, whereby students who, up to this point, had had very little freedom were questioning the value of their education and the decisions made by administrators and faculty on behalf of the students. Higher education was moving away from the moral education of the 1950s toward a new era of challenging established ideals and pushing boundaries for freedom. The 1960s and 70s ushered in the relaxation of many of the constraints that were a way of life for most University students of the previous decade including curfews, restrictions to visitation rights and restrictions on freedoms of speech and expression amongst others. Although enrolment at US universities expanded significantly in the 1960s by more than 10%, it shrunk in the 1970s as students considered the relative value of an undergraduate degree. (Newton & Norris, 1999)

Keeton and Hilberry (1969) considered the goals and objectives of colleges in defining the qualities of the 'good college' and what it would do for its students. Their study of the promises universities make to students and the outcomes students/ graduates expect as promoted by the institution formed a foundation from which much of the scrutiny in higher education was based in the last 50 years. While universities aimed to shape students' perspectives and help them reach their potentials, students expected opportunities and perhaps most clearly, employment when they completed their studies. This disconnect opened a larger debate on value for money and return on investment in higher education, which is still at play today.

Rueben (1996) recounts in the 1970s as a return to an emphasis on vocation training when technical skills re-emerged in higher education with the introduction of community colleges

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.peacecorp.gov/about>

and cooperation between colleges, universities and local agencies of public service with a drift toward enterprise in the 1980s. In 1987, the Boyer commission on Higher Education in cooperation with the Carnegie Foundation noted a 'lack of predefined purpose in HE' as being 'the biggest challenge facing HE today'. Bok in his 2013 book, *Higher Education in America*, highlights the commitment to values in higher education and how these are shaped and protected by faculty and administrators. In an attempt to answer the needs of the individual, businesses, communities, and the wider public, it seems the university has gotten lost in the scramble. Major changes in the 1990s and 2000s (Bok, 2006) led by technology saw hybrid course offerings, Massive Open On-line Courses (MOOCs) and the like, it seems the future may hold more complications for the university's identity and purpose than ever before.

Although this study focuses on an American-style liberal arts programme in the UK, it should be noted that UK higher education also underwent significant changes in its modern history, some of which mirror the changes that took place in the US. From an early spotlight on religious studies to a broad-based curriculum, UK higher education later transitioned to a clearer focus on skill development for civil society. (Tandon, 2008) With European influences and calls for reform, UK higher education took steps to integrate professional skills and theoretical knowledge. In 1963, the Robbins Report recommended that all technical institutions be given university status and that any student who could show the ability and attainment to attend university, should be given a place. With a more diverse student body and a push to ensure graduates could engage with and support their communities, more reforms followed with the 1997 Dearing Report. Dearing set the stage for a new era of student tuition fees and marketisation and changed the relationship between higher education institutions and their students. (Willets, 2017) Although there is a wide variety of higher education programmes in the UK including Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) and literae humanities at the UK's ancient colleges, the mainstream option for most undergraduates in the UK has been a single or joint honours degrees, not a liberal arts course, until now.

As liberal arts programmes pop up around the UK, most recently at Durham, Warwick, King's College London and Bristol, it seems the market is expanding to allow for difference. The marketing messages of these new programmes have been carefully crafted to highlight specific visible outcomes for employability, more choice and more flexibility (in sharp contrast to the single honours degree offer) and a response to the question of difference in higher education. At once considered elite, impractical and irrelevant, the liberal arts offer

is making an appearance as an alternative to traditional single honours degrees on university campuses around the UK. With a message of difference in the form of a broad, interconnected curriculum, modern providers including Richmond are eager to also assure prospective students that the programme is practical, that it offers positive, measurable outcomes and that although it may not interest every student, it is an option and one that competes with equal footing in a market of choice.

UCL: BASC (Bachelor of Arts and Sciences) <sup>5</sup>	‘This exciting 3-year interdisciplinary programme provides great flexibility and choice across the breadth of UCL’s teaching expertise, offering the range and depth of knowledge needed to thrive in our global society...[the programmes will] encourage interdisciplinary thinking and equip you with a range of qualitative and quantitative skills that can be applied to your disciplinary interest and future career.’
King’s College London: Liberal Arts BA <sup>6</sup>	‘Our innovative and flexible liberal arts BA enables you to create a degree programme that suits your own interests. You will select from a wide range of modules across arts, humanities and social sciences and gain a wide-ranging qualification that will enhance employability and provide an ideal platform for work or postgraduate study.’
University of Bristol: BA Liberal Arts <sup>7</sup>	‘The rich and challenging liberal arts programme allows you to explore the arts and humanities while building crucial skills in analysis and communication that will be valuable to you throughout your degree and beyond.’
University of Warwick: BA Liberal Arts <sup>8</sup>	‘The School of Cross-faculty Studies is the home of the University of Warwick’s increasing range of cross and trans-disciplinary degree programmes. The University’s primary goal is to enable its students to succeed through provision of a life-changing education, an outstanding student experience and the development of a global perspective.’
Durham University: BA Liberal Arts <sup>9</sup>	Liberal Arts is a flexible multi-disciplinary programme which gives those who want to specialise in two or more subjects the

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/basc/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/courses/liberal-arts-ba>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/2020/liberal-arts/ba-liberal-arts/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://warwick.ac.uk/study/results/clearing/courses-2019/liberalarts/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.dur.ac.uk/liberal.arts/>

	chance to study in some of the UK's most highly-regarded departments in arts, humanities and social sciences... Graduates of multidisciplinary programmes are especially attractive to employers because of the range of their intellectual skills, their adaptability, their capacity to make creative connections and their independence of mind.'
Richmond the American International University in London <sup>10</sup>	A liberal arts education encourages you to reach across disciplines and build connections between different academic areas. The idea behind the core curriculum is that you receive the best possible start when adapting to the academic world of university, and that you also begin to learn and develop the key transferable skills that the employers are looking for; giving you the competitive edge when you graduate. These skills include written and verbal communication, problem solving, cultural sensitivity and the flexibility to work in a complex and dynamic environment.

Three areas are highlighted clearly in these marketing materials. The study of liberal arts claims to teach and support all students by promoting the idea:

- 1. That there are skills (both quantitative and qualitative) required to fully engage with our 'global society'**
- 2. That interdisciplinary thought offers a broad foundation by which students can acquire knowledge and make connections between fields of study**
- 3. That creativity and innovation are valuable in their impetus to challenge assumptions and to develop critical thinking.**

In short, modern liberal arts education offers a broad curriculum which weaves disciplines together and sparks creative thought, but it also promotes practical outcomes for its graduates including a clear focus on citizenship and community engagement. If education reflects the values and concerns of its time, what does the re-introduction of liberal arts

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.richmond.ac.uk/faculty-research/school-of-general-education-centre-of-modern-languages/>

education say about higher education in the UK and perhaps equally as noteworthy, what does it say about its decline in the US?<sup>11</sup>

There are a number of social and political factors influencing higher education in both the US and the UK. Both systems are dependent on government funding and both are regulated by bodies which have an interest in ensuring graduates will contribute to the local economy. Both are vulnerable to political agendas and both are generally represented within their communities as contributors of social good. (Kezar et al, 2005) The cultural divide between the US and the UK, however, views higher education differently whereby American higher education offers a vast variety of higher educational offerings with different levels of quality for a diverse group of students, the UK offers a somewhat more controlled environment of restricted choices with regulator-controlled quality and carefully restrains the volume of students entering higher education through government number controls.<sup>12</sup> Innovation, uniqueness and difference are important to both cultures, but the design of the student's educational experience appears to be driven more by the market in the US and less by the duty of ensuring a quality student experience and productive graduate outcome. Given this, it is not surprising that pure liberal arts offerings are in decline in the US where the practicalities of return on investment are of key importance in enticing students to join universities. It is exactly these practicalities that contemporary liberal arts programmes aim to address and offer.

Skill building, is often quoted as an advantage of liberal arts to its critics who believe that general studies programmes are impractical and offer no connection to real life. (Christ, 2012; Davis, 2017; Gelb,1998; Khemani, 2012) Proponents of liberal arts believe that the tangible skills learned and honed through liberal arts studies are more useful and more flexible than the technical, often dated skills developed solely within technical training and vocational studies. The ability to communicate well, to work with others from diverse backgrounds, to be flexible and adaptable in the way in which you work, to analyse and solve problems while considering the affects decisions may have on others are all

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<sup>11</sup> In 1994, of the over 3500 institutes of higher education in America, 637 were considered liberal arts colleges. By 2000, only 228 were still in existence with closures becoming a regular occurrence. (Carnegie, 2000)

[https://about.muse.jhu.edu/media/uploads/2000\\_edition\\_carnegie\\_data\\_printable.pdf](https://about.muse.jhu.edu/media/uploads/2000_edition_carnegie_data_printable.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> In 2018, the US had over 3500 institutions of higher education and 19.65 million students enrolled on undergraduate courses. ([www.statistica.com](http://www.statistica.com)) In the same year, the UK had 150 institutions of higher education and 2.4 million students enrolled on undergraduate courses. ([www.hesa.ac.uk](http://www.hesa.ac.uk))

important transferrable skills that could be applied to a number of careers and/or further studies. Employers search for candidates with these skills in varied areas from finance and human resources to social work and teaching. (AGCAS 2018). Transferrable skill development can take the form of classroom preparation, but equally these skills can be developed outside of the classroom through engagement with activities and programmes that students routinely perceive as extra. (Barkley, 2010)

In training students to become citizens of the world who can contribute positively to their local and global communities, liberal arts programmes seek to generate practical skill development which extends to employment and beyond and to outlets of positive community participation and engagement. Entwistle (1997) disputes the argument that liberal education is irrelevant and useless when he argues of the importance of training for 'practical' occupations, in this case, specialist training for school-aged children.

'These disorders [concerns about how schools have failed their students] are sometimes blamed upon the prevalence of the liberal, discipline-based curriculum and its assumed irrelevance for a majority of children who are destined only to become burs or truck drivers, unskilled or semi-skilled factory operatives or unskilled workers cleaning the subway or performing similar menial tasks. The solution has seemed to lie in identifying a curriculum more relevant to the future working lives of these children, though the less skilled the future occupation, the more difficult it is to envisage anything which might be relevant whilst still dignified by the name of education. However though the practice of some occupations appears to make little if any demand whatsoever upon the practical or cognitive knowledge when we consider the educational demands of citizenship in democracy, we face a challenging paradox.'(p.10)

Skills for citizenship are varied and applicable to many different areas. As the supporters of the liberal arts will argue, these skills and the people required to take them on are more vital now than ever before. In a time when our greatest opportunities for communication across nations and cultures exist, isolation prevails. Can a new way of integrated education and citizenship offer a positive change to our globalised world?

One of the key teaching and learning objectives of liberal arts study is to ensure that the curriculum is interdisciplinary so that students have the opportunity to engage in active discussion and inquiry that connects ideas from one subject area to another. To be truly interdisciplinary, it is thought that subjects must be integrated around a problem, concern or issue. Jacobs (1989) defines interdisciplinary education as '...a knowledge view and curriculum approach that consciously applies methodology and language from more than one discipline to examine a central theme, issue, problem, topic or experience.' It is this training to view problems, issues and concerns as multi-faceted that develops students'

critical thinking skills, encourages them to seek connections between seemingly divergent ideas. It also develops their abilities to collaborate with others toward a central goal. Freedman (2003) in his book, *Liberal Education and the Public Interest*, sees this as an opportunity to strike at the 'polarities of thought which create a fragmented society'. Instead of producing research that is specific to one field of enquiry, expanding this across subjects could mean more impact and perhaps more importantly, a better understanding of the impact on the world around us. Interdisciplinarity exists in a number of formats in liberal arts courses in and around the UK currently: from a simple open invitation to take part in courses from different departments or schools to seminars that consider the root of a problem or movement, the issues associated with it and the outcomes and effects on those who are living with it. Some timely examples include climate change, Brexit and the migration/refugee crisis facing Europe. All of these real-world problems are complex and require a multi-disciplinary approach to understanding the social, economic, historical and legal threads that got us to where we are now and further consideration for what is next. Clearly, problems do not exist in isolation. They are a product of inputs from a number of sources, so it seems only logical that their solutions rest in a multitude of viewpoints, areas of inquiry and in collaboration with others. Boyer (1982), the then President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, a US government-endorsed organisation set up to support teaching and teachers in their pursuit of high-quality educational experiences, claimed that the shared experience of education and the ability to integrate subjects within that experience is vital.

General education is not a sentimental tradition; our future well-being and perhaps even our survival may depend on students' understanding the reality of interdependence. (p.9)

Through interdisciplinary education, students can see personal relevance through real-world topics and issues; they can collaborate with others who may have different perspectives on these same topics and issues and they can develop citizenship skills that encourage them to confront injustices and seek restorative action all by playing active roles within their communities. Interdisciplinarity brings a number of practical skills to the forefront and the students in this study who commented that they were 'able to see things from different perspectives' appear to be engaging with and indeed benefitting from this aspect of liberal arts study.

Beyond the practicalities of taking part in discussions and activities that offer real-world problems and issues as talking points, the interest in finding a 'different' kind of course that

drives creativity and innovation is another key motivator for active, engaged learning in the liberal arts. For all the claims of liberal arts courses being an elitist form of education---only for a privileged few, the efforts the interdisciplinary curriculum makes to foster different ways of thinking and learning requires creative thought which surely must be a universal practicality, but perhaps only for those able to engage with the offer.

One of the most significant setbacks in initiating discussions on the practicalities of liberal arts is the need to overcome this public image of elitism which goes hand in hand with the idea of degrees being generally impractical. (Ansell 2016, Christ 2012, Davis 2017, Hopkins 2014, Nussbaum 2010) The reputation of elitism also suggests that liberal arts study is suitable only for middle class students able to meet the cost of the, often hefty, tuition fee<sup>13</sup> and take a leap of faith in an uncertain job market with the promise of transferrable skills and preparation for a life of good citizenship. Wendy Brown in her book, Undoing the Demos (2015) argues that in a neoliberal world where people have become “homoe oeconomicus, the foundation vanishes for citizenship concerned with public things and the common good” (39) and systems are geared toward benefitting financial transactions and those who can make payment. In the 2012-2013 academic year, the 28 members of the Council of Public Liberal Arts in the US, saw an enrolment of just 7.6% of black minority first-time university students with an overall population of minority students of 20%. The number of minority students recruited at private liberal arts institutions in the US were considerably lower. (Smith-Barrow, 2015) Is liberal arts study, which claims to reset the lost values of social responsibility simply perpetuating disadvantage for some and prestige for the middle class? Although this case study does not specifically consider race, class, ethnicity and gender in connecting students’ evaluations of their experiences on their liberal arts programme, the make-up of the participants mirrors the concerns of underrepresentation of minorities within the student population. I will return to this discussion in Chapter 3.

Nussbaum in her 2010 article for the Chronicle of Higher Education, ‘The Liberal Arts are Not Elitist’ refers to education in the midst of ‘a crisis’. The turning point of this crisis, she insists, is a means of simply re-engaging students with humanity to consider the world’s many and varied problems so that they can work towards solutions. These problems won’t

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<sup>13</sup> Tuition costs at American universities can range from \$10,230 per year at a state university to \$35,830 at a private, not-for-profit college.  
(<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/student/advice/cost-studying-university-united-states>)

be solved in a classroom, but rather through actively involved people who have the practical skills to consider the problems, initiate a strategy and work toward a solution. The ideals may be lofty, but the means of engaging with them are anything but impractical. The goal of preparing and training citizens to give back to their communities and live lives where they take part in careers that make a positive impact appears in line with the outwardly less esoteric goals of training a workforce for a booming economy. Perhaps an elite course and a professional course do not differ so much in their goals after all. Menard (2010) agreed that 'the divorce between liberalism and professionalism as educational missions rest on a superstition that the practical is the enemy of the true. This is nonsense.'

(57)

In opening a forum for broad, critical thought, inventive ideas begin to formulate, take shape and sometimes serve as solutions or partial solutions to pressing real-world problems. The practicalities and the value of creative thought are striking and students engaging enthusiastically with this aspect of the course are inevitably involved and integrated into their academic communities. Creativity and innovation as themes in higher education are generally considered positively. (Shaughnessy, 2012) Universities seek innovation through research and faculty seek to reach their students through creative ways of engaging them in lessons. Why, then, are these qualities not associated with practical learning? Perhaps the idea of teaching individuals skills to be creative or to think creatively is counterintuitive. Creativity, after all, does not follow a single path. It requires individuals to think through their own ideas and experiences to formulate new ways of engaging with issues and problems. We have all heard proclamations about what drives creativity. Is it thinking cross-culturally? Is it about pushing the boundaries of science and technology? Is it about conceiving an idea that is entirely new or different? Creativity and what it means to be creative are ideas with many different viewpoints culturally and otherwise. Liberal arts studies aim to challenge students to feel uncomfortable with concepts and ideas that were at one point familiar and agreed. Considering different perspectives, viewing problems and issues as multi-faceted and interdependent and seeking solutions that are the outcomes of critical thought and research are the basis by which liberal arts courses claim their methods of driving innovative thinking. The practicalities seem evident, but the methods by which creativity is honed within liberal arts, it seems, can appear to be at odds with quantitative measures of learning and the associated practical outcomes. Perhaps for those involved in the course, attempts to teach flexibility, adaptability, self-reliant learning and to spark an

interest in independent inquiry are not seen as useful or valuable, but a distraction from other more important tasks.

An educational setting fostering innovation prepares student to address future challenges through innovation. That is, it is not enough to simply generate new ideas, but rather to instil in students the new competencies deemed necessary to face the changes of the world we live in. (Gialamas & Cherif 2013, p.83)

### **The Curriculum**

In considering how a liberal arts education aims to shape a student's perspective, it is important to consider the curriculum: what is being taught? And why? How can education motivate its students to participate actively and engage with their community?

Kant (1781) suggested that there are a series of 'necessary truths' that one should hold as an engaged member of any community. He argued these truths are experienced by the way we relate to the world and beliefs about the world can be tested through experiencing and learning about different perspectives, attitudes and lifestyles. Should the content of a liberal education be entirely utilitarian, i.e. teach only what is necessary to ensure that students are contributing members of their society? Should it be based on rationalism, meaning the curriculum should work to support the development of independent thinking? Or should it be a legacy of teaching shared beliefs and passing on the knowledge of country's cultural and historical traditions?

Modern colleges and universities have all taken a view on what they believe a liberal education is and should be and in doing so have developed a number of curricular programmes specific to their beliefs. (Menard, 2010)

#### **i. Great Books Curriculum**

The move toward a 'great books curriculum' began in the 1920s and 30s after a discussion amongst American academics on how to return to what they believed were higher education's liberal roots. Educators at the time felt that the curriculum had drifted too far from its origins and in trying to rein it in, they looked to classic books and literature to aid in the development of a foundation of knowledge that would serve all. They believed that reading, debating and deconstructing 'great books' should be the basis for delivering a balanced and challenging education. The curriculum included the Harvard Classics of 1909 (volumes of philosophy, mathematics, art, history, science and literature) and was meant to be a foundation in an education of western culture and civilization. In 1929 Mortimer Adler

and Robert Hutchins, then at University of Chicago introduced a 500-volume set of what they believed to be the 'great books of the western world.'<sup>14</sup> Since then, the Great Books curriculum, which later became the Great Books Foundation, has incorporated some non-western elements and attempted to diversify after criticism that it offered only a single-minded Eurocentric viewpoint. Proponents of the Great Books curriculum maintain that it engages students in constructive philosophical thought and develops critical thinking skills which are transferrable to a diverse range of activities. They also believe that by the nature of its simple curriculum, it is accessible to all and an essential means of developing the minds of all people. By engaging critically with great works of literature, it is thought that students become more reflective and responsible thinkers. In addition, a return to tradition, harkens back to the engaging questions of human civilization. (Rose, 2018) A number of US colleges and universities use a great books curriculum to integrate their general education component into their degree programmes. These include University of Chicago, Ohio Wesleyan, St Olaf College and University of Notre Dame to name a few.

These higher education institutions promote the advantages of enabling students to build a foundation of understanding of historical and cultural knowledge which serves as a starting point for further grappling with the complications of the modern world. Critics believe that the great books model is limiting because the texts are heavily western and almost exclusively products of white male privileged authors—indeed the question of what is considered 'great' is largely subjective from institution to institution.

All in all, the Great Books curriculum is meant to set a foundation of knowledge by which further thought and study can be measured and interpreted. Questions like: what is truth? Justice? Liberty? Beauty? are all considered and addressed through the lens of great books. This curriculum seeks to shape students' understanding of the world around them by offering a common cultural understanding by which to begin their academic journeys. Oxford University still offers a Great Books Summer Programme for international students to come to the UK to experience 'classical education' in a classic setting.<sup>15</sup>

## **ii. Thematic, Interdisciplinary Study**

From Great Books, the American liberal arts curriculum developed into a more thematic-styled form of study bringing together what appeared to be diverse concepts in an attempt

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<sup>14</sup> In 1952 54 volumes of the Great Books of the Western World were introduced through Encyclopedia Britannica. In 1990 this was increased to 60 volumes.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.greatbookssummer.com/programs/great-books-oxford/>

to find patterns and meaning in everyday living. For example, courses with titles like 'War and Peace', 'Freedom and Authority' and 'Science and Religious Thought' began to appear. (AACU, 1999) These modules challenged students to consider and reflect on how thoughts and ideas were generated and how disciplines overlapped with one another. Concepts of leadership and responsibility formed a large portion of the course and students were encouraged to consider their place in decision-making alongside their ideas of how to activate change. As students dive into real world problems, they are encouraged to consider solutions from a variety of angles. The aim is to spark intellectual curiosity and encourage students to synthesise research, experiment and discuss ideas and ultimately think creatively about issues that concern all of us.

Kavaloski (1979) called for a 'dialogical education... (which) commits itself to relentless self-reflection by both teachers and students as co-inquirers engaged in the ever-unfinished task of the humanization of man and his environment.' (p. 224) In defining the world around us, we must be innovative, experimental and brave in our consideration of art, science, history, maths, politics and more. Interdisciplinary education attempts to offer a breadth of study while also developing skills that are applicable and useful to a variety of fields. University of Pennsylvania claims that their liberal arts degree, 'build(s) a foundation of intellectual breadth...(to) develop skills that are grounded in theory, but also relevant and useful to any path...' (p. 226). By merging disciplines and thought, students can gain both knowledge and skill.

Interdisciplinary study (or integrative study as it is often called) is employed as a portion of a degree course and indeed as an entire degree course at some universities in the US including Emory University, Wheaton College and Seattle University. Proponents of thematic, interdisciplinary study see its advantages in the opportunities it offers for students to engage fully with complex ideas and extract their own meaning from these encounters instead of the meaning controlled by the faculty instructor. Klein (1999) argues that this style of curriculum encourages higher level thinking skills including critical thought and interpretation. This type of study can be very difficult to offer on a larger scale, however, as it requires small discussion groups and individual tutorials and interactions. Further, it can be complicated to track a student's progress without personalised assessment measures. Integrative studies institutions aim to train their students to identify problems, issues or ideas; consider them critically from a number of angles and offer options and solutions or ideas to move forward. UK joint honours degrees and options to study subjects that are in different disciplines from one's selected course are also good

examples of interdisciplinary study as is the Scottish higher education offer of broad-based pre-honours study within the four-year degree course.

### iii. Variable Course Selection

As programmes expanded and student choice became a regular feature on university campuses in America (Warner & Koepfel, 2009, p. 242) many colleges and universities made the decision to offer a variety of courses that supported a liberal education instead of demanding that specific modules were taken by each student. In doing so, universities put the decision-making power of which modules to take into the hands of the students. Some parameters were set to ensure that students continued to have the breadth of study required of their degree plan, but freedom to choose meant students were entitled to make their own connections and select options they felt were most relevant to them. Proponents of this model have linked course choice and indeed the ability to select and control your own degree programme as an important part of a liberal education. By allowing for student choice, ‘...individuals are able to pursue their own strengths and interests unhindered by the collective aspiration of others.’ (Warner & Koepfel, 2009) Indeed, the collective and the personal experience need not be in conflict at all in a liberal education where students are encouraged to become independent learners, but also to play a larger role in offering solutions to challenges facing society at large.

The changes and developments in liberal arts curriculum show adaptations and responses to the pressures from society and the changing needs of the people. As communities have become more interlinked and influence has widened, consideration for the concerns of the local community also relate to the concerns of the entire international community.

Organisations that bring together students involved in academic work with community members have sprouted up in and around college and university campuses throughout America and have been a long-standing tradition in the UK through the VSO<sup>16</sup> and other partnerships. For example, ‘Imagining America’ and ‘Project Pericles’ serve to collaborate with communities to provide outlets for civic engagement and social responsibility in order to ‘empower students as effective advocates and leaders.’<sup>17</sup>

Universities and colleges such as New York University, University of California at Berkeley and Cornell College encourage students to build their own degree programmes from a selection of offerings. These institutions aim to hone students’ creative spirits by giving

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.vsointernational.org/about>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.projectpericles.org/> and <https://www.imaginingamerica.org/>

them opportunities to explore subjects, be innovative in their approach and combine disciplines in their attempts to consider broad yet complex ideas. By the nature of the inherent diversity of these programmes, a good portion of the course work is independent learning, so for the motivated and keenly inquisitive, 'design your own' programmes are an ideal way to learn. The universities offering these programmes aim to promote individualism and curiosity by coaching students to seek out their own truths and by teaching methods of enquiry and experimentation that will create more engaged learners. The drawbacks to individualised choice of study include concerns about quality control, the ability to accurately evaluate student work and the drain on resources required to cater to individual's personal interests.

#### **iv. The Rise of International Education**

Beyond the mainly curricular changes to liberal arts education over the years, universities began to break down the borders that had existed between students around the world and initiated conversations about topics that were actively being debated in the classroom. (Jones, 2010) What does it mean to be at or below the poverty level in the United States? Is poverty the same in China as it is in Saudi Arabia? Brazil? What can we do to combat poverty on a world-wide scale and how do our actions on one continent affect others? Engaging students in problem-solving skills has become an important means of honing critical thinking acumen, weighing up solutions and negotiating abilities. (Rose, 2017) The race for every university to become 'global' has quickly become crowded and competitive. In becoming global, citizenship and civic engagement have also expanded from the simple notion of helping your own community to the idea of being part of a globalized world where every action has an effect on others worldwide. (Jones, 2010) Social media and access to on-line platforms for communications have added to the ease of international communications and now the student experience is very much grounded in seeking and consulting an international forum. 'Internationalism' in higher education has taken the form of increased recruitment of international students and teaching staff, the creation of multi-national campuses around the world, options for students to study with external partners, international research collaboration and more.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Fordham University offers a 3-continent Masters degree <https://news.fordham.edu/business-and-economics/three-continent-masters-program-aims-to-create-global-business-experts-2/> ; King's College offers an international exchange with National University <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/study/abroad/discover/destinations/exchange-part>; Leeds University

From 2010 to 2015, international students taking part in higher education in the UK have increased by 43%<sup>19</sup>, in the United States by 42%<sup>20</sup> and 53% in Australia.<sup>21</sup> In addition, universities committed to the value of international higher education are offering degree courses at different study locations around the world to immerse their students in the diversity they hope to promote on their campuses.

If the liberal arts experience is meant to educate students with a foundation of broad skills, there is certainly a place for internationalism in its mission particularly as globalism features as a standard subject on the agenda of higher education institutions around the world. Collaborative research, cooperative teaching and shared student experiences are all of key importance to international education. In 2015, the average uptake of students studying abroad from liberal arts colleges in the US was 22% (NAFSA) but international study programmes are becoming much more common with some institutions requiring study abroad as part of their degree requirements (Goucher College, Soka University). If good citizenship is still the foundation of liberal arts study, citizenship has expanded its remit to include global service as well as local. Globalism offers the hope of spreading innovation and opportunity worldwide through active engagement in local and global issues, but does it, perhaps unwittingly, perpetuate the same structure of inequalities that international education seeks to overcome?

Internationalised universities sing the benefits of global higher education in their work with collaborative teaching and learning, the ability to offer a global perspective to students, opportunities to share best practices, in innovation and creativity and also in the practical benefits of being able to work with employers to collaborate on leadership initiatives. Of course there are also hurdles which global education faces: less standardization can mean complications in evaluating student achievement and the potential for education to focus more on profit-making than educating, but hosting courses on a 'global campus' has fast become an aspiration for all higher education institutions hoping to compete in a busy market of choice. (Wildavsky, 2010)

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collaborates internationally on research <https://www.leeds.ac.uk/info/2000/research-and-innovation/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.studying-in-the-uk.org/international-student-statistics-in-uk/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/international-students-united-states>

<sup>21</sup> <https://internationaleducation.gov.au/research/International-Student-Data/Pages/default.aspx>

## **CHAPTER 2: What is University study for anyway?**

The meaning, purpose and use of a university education are topics that have occupied a considerable amount of space and time in the history of higher education. In 1852, John Henry Newman addressed the Catholics of Dublin with his thoughts on the 'Idea of the University'. Although Newman's address considered quite carefully the connection between the church and the university, he spoke very clearly of what he felt was the true value of a liberal education.

[A University]... is a place of teaching universal knowledge. This implies that its object is, on the one hand, intellectual, not moral; and, on the other, that it is the diffusion and extension of knowledge rather than the advancement. If its object were scientific and philosophical discovery, I do not see why a University should have students; if religious training, I do not see how it can be the seat of literature and science. (Newman,1973, iiiv)

Although liberal arts education, now over 165 years later, still values teaching and knowledge transfer, the world has changed significantly and the university has adapted to these changes. With teaching at its heart, the university is now also a centre for research excellence, a partner in business development, an innovator in technology, an investor in local change and much more, but Newman's rhetoric on the purpose of education still rings true to the liberal arts.

...when the Church founds a University, she is not cherishing talent, genius, or knowledge, for their own sake, but for the sake of her children, with a view to their spiritual welfare and their religious influence and usefulness, with the object of training them to fill their respective posts in life better, and of making them more intelligent, capable, active members of society. (Newman,1973,x)

Those students who choose a liberal arts education today amongst the sea of choices in higher education are sold individualised support from the applicant stage, a sense of community, an awareness of the world beyond the university, and the opportunity to take part in a meaningful experience that will prepare them for life beyond the institution, but can a University sustain its mission and vision in the face of an unknown job market, declining student numbers, funding cuts and general economic uncertainty? Can it be all things to all people? (Peachey, 2016)

Collini, in his 2012 book, *What are Universities for?* describes what he sees as a confused existence of the university. With the creation of a 'multiversity' where institutions are so threatened by the market and access to funding that their very existence rests in their diversification: universities must offer something of value to all. To students, this may simply be the promise of employment post-graduation. To the community, this may be

innovation and change. To the university itself, it may be prestige and continued student enrolment. In attempting to meet the needs of all its stakeholders, Collini asks what has become of the University?

‘While in some quarters universities are heralded as engines of technological advance and economic prosperity---and developing nations rush to establish more of them in pursuit of these goals—elsewhere they are attacked for being self-indulgent, backward looking and elitist.’ (3)

What is the purpose of the university: knowledge transfer? Innovation? Affecter of public policy? How universities are perceived and even judged by others also holds an important place in public dialogue and nowhere is this conversation more heated than on university campuses themselves. In the last ten years alone in the UK, higher education has seen the creation of the REF (Research Excellence Framework) in 2014, the TEF (Teaching Excellence Framework) in 2017, and the KEF (Knowledge Excellence Framework) in 2017. The OfS (Office for Students) became the main regulator tasked with keeping students informed of choice within the sector, ensuring equal access and protecting the interests of the consumers. (WONKHE, 2018). The Augar Report (2019) further challenged accessibility to higher education and delved into the underlying concerns of the value for money proposition set up by the UK student loan scheme. In monitoring access, value and choice are universities becoming more limited in their offer? Should universities hold true to their intrinsic values or bend to the requirements of the students who consume their product?

Concerns amongst teaching faculty and administrators that higher education institutions have become wholly accountable to the whims of student consumerism are common on university campuses. (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002) With changes in tuition fees and fierce competition to attract students or even to lure them away from competitors, universities fear that their values have become lost in their race to please the consumer instead of to educate the student. (Guilbault, 2016) Delucchi and Korgen (2002) conducted a small survey of first-year undergraduates at a mid-sized university in the northeast of the US. The researchers aimed to measure the students’ sentiments about their educational experience in terms consumer rights to grades, degrees and the effort put into their academic work. The results of the study revealed that 42% of students believed that paying tuition entitles them to a degree. 73% of students reported that they would take a course in which they would be required to do very little work, but would receive an A and 53% reported that

they believed that it was the instructor's responsibility to keep them attentive in class. The value, it seems is less about achievement and more about the result or reward.<sup>22</sup>

Delucchi (1997) further claims that in the marketing of the 'product' of higher education, universities have had to entice students to join their institutions with 'myths of uniqueness' whereby institutions offering exclusive admissions have found themselves extending their recruitment to become more inclusive to comply with the philosophy of offering opportunities for widening participation. Those offering an 'intimate' educational experience have found themselves expanding to offer opportunities in diverse locations around the world and with partners from much larger institutions. Those dedicated to promoting their research-active faculty have had to find ways to make them more accessible and interesting to less academic students by providing rigorous courses that are also 'manageable' for students. Perhaps the most controversial is the tension between offering a 'classical education' and some practical training that prepares an individual for the world beyond university. Does the mandate of educating and training young people to live lives of service to their community still exist? Does good citizenship still have relevance in the marketplace? Professor Clayton Rose, President of Bowdoin College claims that in today's climate of change and uncertainty, the value of a liberal arts education is perhaps more important than ever before.

At Bowdoin, we work hard to create an environment where students can be intellectually fearless, where they can consider ideas and materials that challenge their points of view, may run counter to deeply held beliefs, unsettle them or may make them uncomfortable. We do this to prepare our graduates to effectively tackle climate change, economic inequality, race relations and so many other issues that polarise us today. In a liberal arts setting, intellectual fearlessness is achieved through the development and enhancement of competence, community and character. (Rose, 2017)

This engagement with service, building of character and integrating citizenship has always been a driving force within liberal arts education. Both Socrates and Plato wrote of the pursuance of great human questions and the necessity to actively engage students in finding the answers. The content of the curriculum is, itself, important, but so also is engagement in the activity of learning—that is learning is a life-time activity and one in which all productive people can and should take part. Without active learning and participation, the principle of liberal arts education appears less relevant. (Bowen, 2005) Generating active citizenship and preparing participating citizens of the world ready to

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<sup>22</sup> Further studies were initiated by HERI (Higher Education Research Institute) annually. See <https://heri.ucla.edu/publications-tfs/>

contribute positively to their communities are key phrases used often in the missions and visions of liberal arts institutions, but can education be both intrinsic (for its own sake) and extrinsic (useful, purposeful and meaningful) outside of the University's campus? Do these missions actually contradict themselves?

To make a difference in the world, to move from individual virtue to civic virtue, to transform our job or career or life into a vocation, we must recognize a set of overarching aspirations and normative ideals with which we are willing to align ourselves, and we must discern what issues in the contemporary world are most significant in light of their deviation from these higher values or in light of their pressing importance for humankind...We must then seek to align our talents and disposition with these recognized needs so as to serve a higher purpose...what is the greatest value? What are the most pressing challenges of the age? Who am I? What ought I to do with my life? These questions form the core of the liberal arts education. (Roche, 2010: 148)

Pascarella and Terenzini's 1991 study of students' engagement with the liberal arts and students' quest for 'transformative' learning hits at the heart of the argument: How can an institution create a learning experience that changes the ways in which a student sees the world and 'transforms' him or her into an active citizen with the acumen to understand complex ideas and drive change? Their longitudinal study indicated growth in personal skills (including critical thinking) of students over the period of their degree course, but admitted that this skill development could be attributable to a number of different factors from the curriculum, peer influence, engagement in activities and more. In their conclusion the researchers summarised, 'Perhaps the strongest conclusion [from this study] that can be made is the least surprising. Simply put, the greater the student's involvement or engagement in academic work or in the academic experience of college, the greater his or her level of knowledge acquisition and general cognitive development.' (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 602) Involving students in an interesting curriculum with ample opportunity to take part in active learning motivates students to develop personal skills, learn subject matter and apply it within their daily lives. (Barkley, 2010)

This dilemma of shaping ideals versus educating students has plagued liberal arts in the press for a number of years—how can an education that appears so inwardly valuable to the individual really be useful to the wider world in its application? (Christ, 2012) Perhaps the key is not so much in *what* is being taught, but rather the pedagogical basis and *delivery* of the curriculum. Although there was (and still is) a controversy over what to teach, there appears to be much more agreed consistency in how to teach.

At its core, liberal arts education aims to engage its students in the stimulation of searching for answers to compelling problems. (Menard, 2010) In its inward examination, it encourages students to formulate meaningful questions about the world and motivates them to strive to find the answers. How do liberal arts programmes and degrees engage their students?

In 1987, Chickering and Gamson cited seven principles of good practice in an undergraduate education which were meant to engage students in the offerings of the University and create an environment that fostered a quality educational experience. The seven principles are:

1. student/faculty contact: to build a relationship of academic partnership in the inquiry of universal questions
2. cooperation amongst students: to work with others to consider, discuss and offer suggestions to real world problems and issues
3. active learning: to involve students in learning through participation in discussion and active enquiry
4. prompt feedback to students: to offer critical responses to students' work in an attempt to challenge them and push them to consider alternative ways of thinking
5. time on task (learning): to spend the time to think critically about ideas that require more than a cursory look
6. high academic expectations: to hold expectations of success high so that students and faculty will work to meet them
7. respect for diverse students and diverse ways of knowing: to bring diversity into lessons and discussions to further broaden ideas and thought

A liberal arts education aims to create an engaging community where all seven of these principles live and breathe in a collaborative learning environment. The means of doing this within a liberal arts education are to facilitate (not lead) discussions and debates whereby ideas are formulated, considered, evaluated and discussed. This environment creates opportunities for students to make connections across disciplines and cultures and to begin to fill a tool box for research and critical analysis in self-reliant, independent inquiry. (Roche, 2010) In establishing this environment, some educationalists have likened student engagement in the liberal arts to a means of gaining capacities or even human capital. Sen (1985) believed that the ability to live freely and achieve basic well-being has to do with a human's ability to learn capacities. These capacities relate to health, emotions, thought,

community, environment and relationships and form the basis for development. Although Sen's capability approach has been used most often to consider human economic development and progress, in attempting to shape and mould active citizens through general education, Sen's approach appears to offer a good foundation for student development. The 'capabilities' presented to students as essential to their learning within general education are the transferrable skills required to engage them in the compelling questions and concerns of their community: critical thinking skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, the ability to be flexible, adaptable and resilient. Human capital gained from honing these capacities is what benefits the work force. (Sen, 1997)

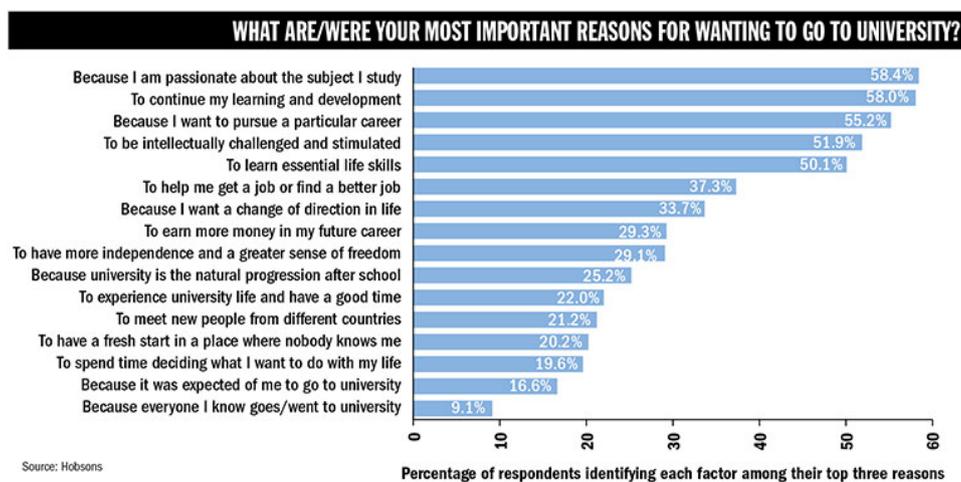
'Hiring liberal arts graduates in business does not mean simply enhancing the communication skills of employees; it also involved having employees whose education has encouraged them to develop a moral compass and ask searching questions. In an age that has suffered tremendous financial crises—partly as a result of a failure of managers and leaders in business as well as in government to grasp the larger picture---the liberal arts are more essential than ever.' (Roche, 2010: 14)

We should not forget the student in a discussion of what a university education is for, of course. Colleges and universities have their own agendas, but likewise students have motivations for attending university and expectations of the outcomes of their work. Barkley (2010) encouraged colleges and universities to consider the university's motivations versus the student's motivations in taking part in higher education. Engaging a student in any educational offering will require a knowledge of the student's motivations for studying and his/her aspirations for the future. Although the University may be interested in educating a 'well rounded' generalist prepared to meet the challenges of the 'real world', the student tends to be much more interested in the practicalities of where the degree will take him/her post-graduation. In addition, historically, a liberal education had a moralistic mission to guide graduates into a life of service and duty. Louis Menard (2010) sees this as the main problem with general education in America.

'...general education is...perceived as an attempt to impose on liberal education a mission—call it 'preparation for life'---whose rationale liberal education has traditionally defined itself in opposition to. Educating for learning's sake is a lofty ideal, but is preparing students to lead active lives of good citizenship with a commitment to lifelong learning an unworthy mission?' (p.25)

In a 2017 poll of more than 60,000 students from 65 universities around the world, students were asked what their most important reasons for going to university were. The

top three responses were all closely aligned: a keen interest in the subject; a desire to learn and develop and a wish to pursue a particular career. (Hobsons, 2017)<sup>23</sup>



Although a student's interest in a specific course is paramount to his/her choice to attend university, other reasons are followed swiftly by the practicalities of pursuing a career and building transferrable skills to manage a productive, fulfilling life outside of university. In separating the lofty from the practical it seems we may be working toward counterproductive goals. Being 'passionate' about a subject surely supports a graduate in a better career and a love of learning must help to provide more skill and direction post-graduation. It seems the practical and the intangible meet on a number of levels when considering the value of a liberal arts education.

In an attempt to highlight practical outcomes within liberal arts education, skills development inevitably becomes a focus because it offers a somewhat measurable means to consider value. (Tomlinson, 2008) But which skills are unique to liberal arts programmes and how are these learned and honed throughout the student's period of study? As Chickering and Gamson (1987) note, team work, critical thinking and analysis, self-management and motivation and respect for diversity are key skills gained in active learning. Active learning also produces flexible, adaptable, able communicators with the abilities to consider problems carefully and the motivation to identify how potential solutions affect the community. (Davis, 2017) These 'soft skills', proponents argue, are valuable to the community through active citizenship, to the individual and in their capacity to promote life-long learning and to the employer who is seeking individuals who can

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.internationalstudentsurvey.com/international-student-survey-2017/>

manage a number of different challenges. (Smith-Lewis, 2019) Indeed, institutions aiming to show value for money initiatives and longer-term return on investment point to graduate outcomes, successful alumni and student satisfaction as key indicators of success. Although liberal arts programmes insist that the learning environment, curriculum and opportunities to be innovative and creative within the course shape these skills<sup>24</sup> within their students, it is not to say that other degree courses cannot and do not do the same, but the value in thinking broadly, connecting ideas through interdisciplinarity and challenging students to play an active role in problem solving are the key initiators liberal arts offers in the role of developing skills in students. (Gialamas and Cherif, 2013)

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<sup>24</sup> For the purpose of this study, participants were asked to consider how they developed the following skills over period of their first year of study: leadership skills, working with others, problem solving, flexibility, respect for diversity, taking initiative, evaluation of data analysis, resilience, critical thinking, communications skills

### **Chapter 3: Education as a Social Construction**

In considering what higher education is, we might first benefit from considering how it is constructed socially and what agreements students make as they enter a university. Studying at any institution comprises not just an academic experience, but also a social experience. This social experience exerts a significant influence over students and has been featured as the single most important environmental factor influencing student development within the university (Astin, 1993). Although the decision to study at a particular institution is a personal (or potentially a family) choice, the learning that takes place once the student joins is closely related to the community in which the student lives and studies. Lev Vygotsky (1934) in his theory of social constructivism described learning as an activity that cannot be separated from its environment. Although children all have a capacity to develop and learn, learning takes place at different speeds and on different trajectories in relationship to the community in which the individual lives. Vygotsky argues that learning is inherently social from parent to child, tutor to student and even peer to peer. In order to affect learning, there must be two main elements: a 'more knowledgeable other' and a 'zone of proximal development'. The 'more knowledgeable other' in the case of the university would typically be a faculty member or administrator, but could equally be a peer with an enhanced skill or knowledge of a specific topic. The 'zone of proximal development' is an environment where knowledge can be transferred, skill can be practised and discoveries can be made. In the case of the university, this could be a classroom, the library, a dormitory room or even the student common room or the canteen. Learning takes place when these two elements come together. Quaye and Harper (2015) argue that universities wishing to make the most of their educational offerings must work to employ engaging faculty and staff (more knowledgeable others) and attempt to create environments (zones of proximal development) where opportunities to learn are frequent, valued and celebrated by both student and tutor.

When students are actively engaged, they take part in their own learning, build healthy relations, feel a sense of community, make a positive contribution and work proactively to cope with life's challenges. Social psychologist Laurie Schreiner (2010) terms this 'the thriving quotient'. In a 2009 study of students at 27 universities in the US, an anonymous survey of five key factors of student success was employed in an attempt to measure 'students' academic engagement, psychological well-being and interpersonal relationships that are predictive of their future success and persistence [in higher education]' (2-10). The five factors comprised: engaged learning and academic determination (features of

academic success), diverse citizenship and social connectedness (features of interpersonal success) and positive perspective (a feature of intrapersonal success). Although 'success' itself is a relative term, for the benefit of this study, it was defined as students fulfilling their goals within the context of a healthy environment. The thriving quotient, although a measurement that somewhat simplifies how students take part in their university experience, offers a fairly reliable view of what engages students and how universities might more successfully work toward building opportunities to ensure active learning. Building community membership and driving engagement are important components of building a positive educational experience.

If we consider education as a social construction that we all subscribe to when enrolling at a university—selecting an institution is undoubtedly a cultural decision based on where a student best feels he or she can find 'fit'. (Kezar, 2001) A university's mission, vision and ethos contribute to this and students subscribe to various communities based on their affinities and affiliations. Cultural change theorists have used social change theories to explain higher education institutions' ability to build cohesive academic communities where all members understand, subscribe to and live the mission and vision of the institution. In part this has been a result of an 'informational cascade' whereby institutions create a reputation for themselves and encourage conformity as part of this community. (Bikhchandani et al, 1992) Being a Harvard student/graduate comes with certain expectations, for example, and those who find themselves in this position, follow the model of those who have come before. The importance of a strong organizational culture is needed to ensure all members of the community understand the mission, vision and values of the institution. McMahon (1997) terms this 'a social construct that is mediated by language and social discourse.' If the values and mission of the institution are agreed and adhered to, learning takes place within this construct and meaning is created and agreed. Finding the right 'fit' is, therefore, imperative for the student to integrate socially and academically.

“Higher education institutions emphasize qualities that differentiate themselves from their peer institutions. This is seen through culturally based institutional attributes, the most significant being the history of the institution. History not only details the significance of a particular institution, but also represents the process of change over time” (Kezar 2001, p.86).

Liberal arts education and liberal arts institutions are no strangers to change. They have been re-inventing themselves for centuries to accommodate the communities they support. In initiating these changes, teaching and learning have taken on a constructivist or

interpretivist model of socially constructed learning, meaning learning is negotiated through experience in the context of the environment. Curriculum is important, but the learning environment perhaps equally so.

Duffy and Jonassen (1992) laid out eight key characteristics that build the foundation of this constructivist learning environment:

1. There are multiple representations of reality
2. The multiple representations represent the complexity of the real world
3. Meaning is found when students are involved in authentic tasks within a meaningful context—real life scenarios
4. Students are engaged when a real-world setting is provided and case-based learning is offered
5. Thoughtful reflection is encouraged and valued by all
6. Knowledge is constructed through context-based learning
7. Meaning is negotiated through social interaction

The environment Jonassen describes is open, supportive, practical yet creative and perhaps most importantly, inclusive. There are freedoms given by which students are encouraged to explore and consider new ideas but these are debated amongst the community and meaning is generated and agreed through discussions. In this environment, students create their 'reality' of what a university is based on the choices they make to join a specific institution, but only if they agree to engage in the education as it is offered to them. Student engagement requires commitment both from the student and from the institution. These mutual commitments build from new student orientation into an engaging academic experience to career development initiatives and are all supported by services and programmes that enhance learning opportunities.

As these commitments are now a portion of institutional marketing, many universities have decided to feature their commitments to students in a partnership declaration called a Student Charter. In 2011, the UK Department for Business Innovation and Skills commissioned a working group to study UK HEI student charters: their requirements, value and place in recruiting and retaining students. The working group recommended that all HEIs create institutional student charters because of their value to 'set out mutual expectations of the university and the student'. (Department for Business, Innovation and

Skills, 2011)<sup>25</sup> The benefits, the working group found, were in vocalising the mission of the institution clearly and consistently, in signposting further information and in focusing on regular engagement with students about their experience and learning.

It is important to consider that students taking the step into higher education also come from different backgrounds where they may have had very different previous educational experiences, family and peer influences, and different ways of relating to the world around them. This will, of course, shape the way in which they identify with their own community and will be a pivotal reason in their willingness to engage with their new community (or not). The choice to attend university at all is a choice embedded in students' gender, ethnicity, class and social upbringing. (Reay et al, 2005) Sullivan (2001) sees student choice of where to go and what to study as a 'matrix of influence' including overlapping sway from family, friends, school and the institution itself. It seems, over time, the choice has also become more complex. With the UK higher education's expansion of offerings, choice is now not simply about the course, but also about finance, travel, the student experience, employment opportunities and more. Collins (2004) argues that with changes in higher in the UK, the university sector as a whole is going through a 'process of stratification' which results in a more diverse array of options from a variety of institutions with different missions and values offered to a more diverse population of students all searching for the right fit. For students entering university this means more choice, but also more confusion about which course to choose at which university. Choice is both a 'medium of power and stratification' (Giddens, 1995) as individuals with different resources and pressures inevitably make different decisions. In searching for 'fit' students are weighing up their previous experiences in search of a new community that will offer them a positive, fulfilling and, perhaps unique or different place.

Marketing an engaging student experience, setting student and institutional expectations early on and translating these agreements into action begins the evolution of what Bourdieu termed 'habitus' (1977)—the formation of ingrained habits, skills and attitudes towards the community, education in general, and one's place in all of this. With a comfortable understanding and agreement of mission and roles, the social experience of education takes on a means of shaping cultural capital within the student population through the student's educational experience. Reay (2001) suggests that there are

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/32420/11-736-student-charter-group.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/32420/11-736-student-charter-group.pdf)

institutional contexts at work which affect all students' choices when it comes to selecting a university. The decision-making process is supported by organisational practices and can be in partnership or potentially at odds with the students' external influences including their previous school, family, friends and their own perceptions of higher education. In the case of Richmond where there is a comparatively short institutional history (established in 1972), an offer of a degree course that is largely different from the mainstream and a student experience that reflects social responsibility and global citizenship, the institutional habitus is likely considerably different from the new student's previous experiences and those students wishing to join are making a leap toward something different. Building a diverse and inclusive community is, therefore, no easy task.

What is the 'experience' that a liberal arts education is attempting to create for all of its students? How can students engage with it and take an active role in building the skills and objectives it sets out to create for them? What are the students' perceptions of the value and worth of these programmes? The answers are perhaps best considered through the curriculum, programmes and services of the individual institution.

#### **Chapter 4: Richmond University: An American Liberal Arts Programme in London**

This study sets out to consider an American liberal arts curriculum at an international university in London and how, if at all, students perceive it is preparing them with necessary useful skills for life beyond university. It seeks to consider the mission, vision and values of the institution within its unique culture, how these values and ideals are communicated and taught inside and outside of the classroom, how students engage with them (or not) and what learning outcomes are the product of this engagement.

Richmond, the American International University in London (RAIUL) is a small international university offering four-year degrees in the American liberal arts tradition and a small number of specialised taught post graduate courses. RAIUL has a liberal arts core curriculum of required modules. The curriculum also requires students to enrol on modules outside of their major area of study as part of their degree requirement and encourages students to take part in student leadership activities, engage in personal development programmes and get involved in the local community. The programme itself is not pure liberal arts study, but rather a compilation of the elements of broad-based academic study, interdisciplinarity and citizenship training/social responsibility which are all delivered as highlighted in the University's mission and vision. The values and ethos of the institution include a commitment to social responsibility and global citizenship which are rooted in its approach to the student experience. Students can expect longer contact hours, personalised support and guidance and the expectation that they will become active and contributing members to their academic community. Although these may not be entirely unique to RAIUL, they are in contrast to larger universities which would likely struggle to offer the same type of environment on a larger scale.

My role at the University is to work with faculty, staff and students to create and manage an engaging student experience that brings together academic study with support services and programmes to enhance student life by offering skill development to set students on a path toward further study or employment. The University is uniquely the only dual accredited (US/UK) institution in the UK which is validated through the Middle States Commission on Higher Education in the US and whose degrees are validated by the Quality Assurance Agency in the UK. RAIUL values international, interdisciplinary study and promotes personal development as part of every degree plan. Its motto is 'unity in diversity' and internationalism is a key feature of its curriculum, student support services, co-curricular and extra-curricular programming and a key element of the institutional

mission. The University has three UK campuses: the Richmond Hill Campus in southwest London (for lower division students), the Kensington Campus in west London (for upper division and postgraduate students) and the Leeds Campus (in Yorkshire) for international sports management students. In addition to the UK campuses, RAIUL also operates two Italian study centres: one in Florence and the other in Rome.

RAIUL's undergraduate population is about 1,500 students with a large proportion (about 58%) of these being short term visiting students taking part in semester-long (4 month) or year-long programmes. Richmond admits about 300 new undergraduate students each year who make up a combination of first year students, transfer students (who have completed some University credit already) and visitors. The University's student population is roughly one third US students, one third UK & EU students and one third international students. US and UK/EU students have access to government-sponsored loans and grants while international students are almost entirely self-funding. The University offers a generous scholarship programme to encourage applications from a broad range of students.

Richmond's mission and vision are outlined on the University's website at <http://www.richmond.ac.uk>

'Richmond University's vision is to be the top liberal arts institution in the UK and Europe. In order to achieve this, we have a mission to educate and inform future generations by providing them with the knowledge and support to think critically, the freedom to challenge assumptions and the skills to work with others.

We are committed to continuously carrying out five key points. Firstly, as an international institution, we are committed to internationalism and diversity in all of our academic endeavours. We commit to excellence in teaching and learning while providing a high calibre student experience. We commit to interdisciplinary research and scholarship for our faculty and staff to pursue their academic passions. We commit to our faculty, staff and students in order to provide the best work and academic environment in order for them to achieve their full potential. Lastly, we commit to engage with local, national and international businesses with the aim of helping to prepare and develop graduates for employability and leadership in the global economy.'

In addition, the values of the University are also available online.

Richmond University values five key things: Freedom of thought and expression, inclusiveness, diversity, professionalism and integrity, and responsibility. We believe that it is the purpose of the university to discuss, critique and educate in an open and positive manner. As a university, we aspire to include all people and opinions. We also celebrate the diversity of all members of the Richmond University community. Lastly, we aim to be effective, efficient and ethical in all

aspects of our work and we accept that our actions have impact on others, therefore we aim to make a positive difference in the world around us through equitable engagement.

Building an academic partnership in which students and staff work together in pursuit of knowledge, not just as providers and consumers.

Creating an environment of academic enquiry and challenge, where students are encouraged to engage, work with and participate in a vibrant academic community where interdisciplinary teaching and learning is key to the curriculum.

Ensuring dedicated student support so that all students can meet their academic and personal challenges no matter their background or educational need.

Fostering a culture of responsibility, so that students engage with the world around them to take on responsibilities while at University and pursue roles that seek to make a positive contribution after graduation.

Recognising diversity in our population and in ways of thinking, teaching and considering the world. Richmond is committed to living by the motto of 'Unity in Diversity' – we aspire to understand, accept and celebrate what makes us different from each other.

Supporting academic research and professional engagement, for its value in innovation and creativity and to inform best practices in teaching and learning.

The liberal arts curriculum comprises a foundation of 10 modules which are selected to offer a broad foundation for intellectual inquiry and serve as a base for cross curricular learning and independent thinking. Richmond's degrees aim to help students 'reach across disciplines and build connections between different academic areas.' Skill building is an integral part of the student learning experience whereby students 'learn to develop the key transferable skills that employers are looking for.' The 'core curriculum' as it is referred to at RAIUL, was created to begin this journey of transition into University life. The 10 key modules that make up 'the core' curriculum are:

- 1. The First Year Seminar:** this module is designed to help students make a successful transition into university life. It relies on a multidisciplinary syllabus and assists students in developing key academic skills that will be important later in their degree course. Theme-based sessions introduce students to global topics and issues that are relatable.

The First Year Seminars for the Fall 2014 term included:

**The Philosophy of Ethics:** a module centred around the philosophical ideas of right and wrong and how these can often be at odds with one another

**Planet Pioneers:** a module about conservationism, exploration and scientific enquiry

**London: Community and Volunteering:** a module about the challenges of living and engaging in a global capital city

**Sport & Society:** a module about how sport has changed and continues to change from the influences of the communities that create and support it

2. **The Academic Literacies Programme:** this requirement is made up of two modules designed to enable all students to operate proficiently within the University and beyond by enhancing their competencies in critical thinking and reading, effective academic writing and information literacy. Proposed competencies include critical thinking, analysis, preparation and presentation of academic research and evaluation of resources.
3. **A further five modules to engage with different ways of knowing:** these modules include a scientific module which relates to scientific reasoning and experimentation, an expressive module that brings together creative skills in production, a numerical module that relates to quantitative reasoning and a temporal/spatial module that brings a historical, geographical or other perspective.
4. **A further two modules outside of the student's major course of study encompassing 2 levels:**

**(Level 2):** *Students can choose from a list of 24 potential courses in Art Design and Media, Business & Economics, History, Philosophy, Modern Languages, Development Studies, International Relations, Political Science, Sociology or Theatre.*

**(Level 3):** *Students can choose from list of 35 potential courses in Business & Economics, Communications, Environmental Science, History, Religion, Development Studies, International Relations, Political Science, Sociology or Theatre.*

The RAIUL liberal arts curriculum claims to intentionally teach transferrable skills such as flexibility, adaptability, critical thinking, communication skills and resilience. These are woven into the curriculum at all levels, but are of particular significance to the classes listed above as part of the core curriculum required of all first year students. Skill building is intentionally taught not only through the academic course, but it is also an integral part of the student experience through student engagement with services and programmes designed to enhance the student's overall university experience (including student leadership opportunities, careers initiatives, student representation, activities and more).

As part of the first year experience at RAIUL, all students are offered seminars in time management, transferrable skills and CV writing, access to student-run clubs and societies and sports, civic engagement through volunteering, peer mentoring in the first year seminars, subject-specific peer tutoring as requested and access to workshops for

academic writing and maths. Offering a student experience that requires students to interact and communicate with one another, think creatively and make connections with diverse ideas and beliefs requires dedicated engagement techniques required to keep students involved in a dynamic learning environment. (Quaye & Harper, 2015)

RAIUL aims to engage students in learning through a number of initiatives in line with Chickering and Gamson's seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education: by delivering seminar-style modules based on relevant, timely topics in which faculty and students interact and negotiate learning; by ensuring that assignments and activities are purposeful and demand meaningful outcomes making students the authors/creators of their own understanding in cooperation with their peers; by ensuring that learning is interactive and measurable, but also reflective and engaging.

A study of the impact of liberal arts education in the US in comparison to similar impacts of education at larger research universities and regional institutions is a precursor to this study. In their study of just under 2000 undergraduate students, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that within the eleven areas<sup>26</sup> they used to measure intellectual and personal growth, only three made a marginal difference to impact outcomes to those who studied a liberal arts degree: an openness to diversity, learning to self-reflect and think critically and the acquisition of academic writing skills. Liberal arts graduates reported feeling more prepared for their first job in comparison to other university graduates in the study and were also more likely to take on roles of responsible citizenship, take part in continuing education courses and record a higher level of graduate attainment. These outcomes are in keeping with the overarching mission of developing skills for active citizenship. Pascarella and Terenzini's study noted limitations to the reliability of the outcomes based on background, family relationships and personal experience amongst other factors, but the study remains a foundation by which other studies of the engagement and outcomes of American undergraduate higher education have built upon.

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<sup>26</sup> These include: reading comprehension, critical thinking, plans to continue to a graduate degree, locus of control over one's on learning, capabilities in mathematical thinking, capabilities in scientific thinking, a positive attitude toward literacy, a preference for higher order tasks, an openness to diversity, learning to self-understand and academic writing skills.

## **Chapter 5: The Study & Methods**

In conducting this study, I sought to answer the following research questions:

1. Why do students choose a liberal arts-style degree course as opposed to other types of undergraduate study?
2. What are the perceived benefits of the course from the students' perspective?
3. How are these benefits realised in study and activity outside of the classroom?
4. How does student engagement relate to student success if at all?
5. What practical measurable skills do students develop in their first year and what value is attributed to each of these skills?

Specifically, with the aim of finding the answers to these questions, I set out to study a first-year cohort of students entering university for the first time in order to attempt to understand their reasons for joining a liberal arts programme and the students' engagement (or disengagement) in the purposeful teaching, activities and programmes surrounding the course. I focused on a single intake of first-year students in an attempt to get a snapshot of the most influential year at university for undergraduates. (Kuh, 2001)

The students in this study were entering Richmond the American International University in London to start courses in September 2014. The sample consisted of a group of 155 students all aged 17 to 26 with a median age of 19. They were 40% male and 60% female and were made up of four basic nationality groups: US (39%), UK (35%), EU (17%) and international/ other (9%). Their previous academic achievement was relatively similar (96-112 UCAS points). Their ethnicities were 64% white and a mixture of other backgrounds, none with a significant majority.<sup>27</sup> Although socio-economic status was not a key area of data collection for this study, the uptake of loans and scholarships across the cohort indicates a mixed population. 60% of the UK/EU cohort received funding from the Student Loans Company and 25% received additional scholarships while 48% of US students received funding from the US federal loans scheme and 85% received scholarships. International students were entirely self-funded. 41% of the group were enrolled on courses in the School of Communications, Arts and Social Sciences and 59% were enrolled on courses in Business and Economics.

In preparation for this study, I visited all of the First Year Seminar modules being offered in September 2014 and spoke to students about my research. They were told that the study

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<sup>27</sup> 7% Arab, 6% Hispanic, 9% African/Mixed, 7% Asian/Mixed, 7% Other

would consider RAIUL's liberal arts offerings—both academic and co-curricular/social—and would consider their experiences throughout the first year through surveys, a focus group, course evaluations and student data. The purpose of the study, as explained to the students, was to better understand the first-year student experience at the University as it related to the first-year seminar and activities and support arranged around this module. They were also informed that this study was a final research project for a doctoral degree I was enrolled on at the Institute of Education and, if successful, would be published and accessible through the library. All students participating in the study were provided written documentation concerning the research and signed a consent form to allow their information to be used in anonymised form.

This study into the student experience at Richmond the American International University in London is an insider investigation into how students relate to the University's mission, vision and values and how they in turn engage with the liberal arts programme as a whole. My role at the University is to create an engaging student experience for all of the University's students. This, of course, rests in my interpretation of the University's mission, vision and values, and so inevitably my role as the researcher is laden in institutional familiarity and entrenched in institutional culture. As an insider, my ideas of the University's culture overlay the students' interpretations, but as the initial focus of this study was to gauge students' affiliations with the University's mission, vision and values, having an insider's perspective may have actually served as an advantage in this case study. In inculcating cultural values and ideals and bringing students into an established educational community, my role in assisting them through the journey of their university experience is partly to highlight the inclusivity of the educational community so that students can begin to get involved with it. It is also to ensure their community memberships are cemented in a foundation of acceptance and support. In this sense, staying removed and aloof from the community would only serve to weaken the student experience and my evaluation of it.

The debate over the bias and loss of objectivity that insider research brings (Mercer, 2007) was born out of the concern of interpreting data outcomes while remaining non partial and objective. The 'bias' and 'lack of objectivity' in this sense allows for a consolidated view of what a Richmond liberal arts student experience is meant to be and how students can productively engage with it. In evaluating the outcomes of what the University aims to offer students, it is important to fully understand, from an internal perspective, what indeed the experience aims to be. The main disadvantages of being too close to the study

subjects, in this case study may have actually worked as an advantage given the importance of membership within the community and the trust associated with this membership. Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) highlight the three main advantages of insider research which, I believe, are all applicable to this study. First, that the insider will have a better understanding of the topic at hand and will not require an introduction to the issues that surround the research. Second, the researcher will not be seen as an intruder or as disruptive to the participants because s/he is already a part of the community. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the researcher can relate to the participants of the research having a grasp of the social and cultural environment surrounding them. In attempting to identify the interests, needs and objectives amongst first year students at my institution, I drew heavily upon my insider knowledge to build rapport and openness with participants, but worked carefully not to presuppose their feelings and ideas about the undergraduate programme. I was careful not to confuse my role as researcher and Dean (Dwyer and Buckle, 2009) and took steps to reassure students that their input was valued by the University and would feature as an important part of considering the first-year programme by senior administrators and faculty members in potentially influencing change while also contributing to my research as a doctoral student at the Institute of Education.

Research questions pertaining to affinities and affiliations with the liberal arts have their methods rooted in theories of social inclusion and community engagement. (Jenson, 2010) Social inclusion as defined by Coppo (2002) is the impact of feeling valued when differences are respected and basic needs are met resulting in people feeling they can live in dignity. Although the foundation of a socially inclusive community rests in people feeling valued and important as part of a group, establishing 'fit' within a group has much to do with how an individual rates his/her contributions to the group. If the community member perceives value and worth in the group and his/her own contributions are also valued, social inclusion works and a healthy, collaborative community is born. The Princeton Review (2018)<sup>28</sup> has surveyed US students for more than 25 years about their choice of institutions and have found that there are four areas of key importance which students consider in order to ensure fit at university. These include academic, social, financial and career-related options. Academically, students are looking for an engaging and challenging experience that offers them opportunities to learn and grow within their area of interest. Socially, students consider the size, student make up, opportunities to get involved in

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<sup>28</sup> <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-rankings/best-colleges>

activities/events/programmes etc. and relate these all back to their academic course. Financially, students are looking for a 'value for money' proposition that gives them the academic experience and practical skills that will enable them to fulfil their future goals. Career-related objectives focus more on future achievements, but they are a key deciding factor in the value for money proposition—i.e. will this degree help me find the right job when I graduate? Richmond's aim, to educate responsible global citizens who will take on future positions that impact others positively is a featured element of the University's mission and vision and one with which successfully-engaged students seem keen to identify. Personal development as a global citizen demands personal engagement in the community and so Richmond's commitment to offering practical development in key transferrable skills is a testament to this. Global citizenship (UNESCO, 2018) is bestowed on those who understand the rights and responsibilities engaged community members have to act in the best interest of others by seeking collaborative solutions to world problems.

This study draws heavily on the three decades of research conducted by Terenzini and Pascarella in the United States about 'How College Affects Students' (2016). Their studies of the social, intellectual, moral and personal development of students in post-secondary education involve hundreds of institutions in America and span over 30 years. Although their work was not specifically focussed on liberal arts education, Pascarella and Terenzini's research addresses differing environments and how students engage with the offerings at each institution and what, in turn, this means for the students' personal development and growth. The researchers noted that '...change during the undergraduate years reveals clear directions...under the general topics of learning and cognitive change, psychosocial changes, attitudes and values and moral development.' (p.572) Although there have been considerable gains in understanding how university students grow and change in their four years of studies, the data of these studies focussed heavily on mainstream university students with little consideration for a more diverse population. International students, for example, were not a major focus nor were populations joining higher education for the first time. While the researchers' longitudinal studies offer perspectives on socio-economic changes, quality of life indices and life time attitude changes, my case study aims only to consider the very early developmental changes seen in first year students and how these affect a willingness to engage with their new community and course, persist with their studies and ultimately progress on their course.

## **Methods**

This study used individual anonymised electronic surveys; a quantitative measure of engagement and persistence in the cohort as a whole; a small focus group which was a subset of the whole cohort; a second anonymised survey and an evaluative summary of the students' perceptions of the liberal arts core curriculum at the end of their first year of study. The mixed methods employed aimed to measure a cohort's perceived belief and interest in the entire student experience and how this perceived engagement and affiliation produced results in the form of transferable skills and preparedness for continued academic study at university.

The methods used incorporate several different strategies in order to triangulate outcomes and consider how students build meaning both as individuals and within a group context (Kelle, 2001; Meijer et al, 2002). Surveys give a quantified overview of the students' views and experiences whereas the focus group allows for more reflection (Wolff et al, 1993) The methods were chosen in part to mirror Alexander Astin's theory of student involvement (1984) which considers the transition of new students into higher education by means of involving them in the life and the work of the university. Astin believes that there are three stages/factors employed in student involvement: inputs, environment and outcomes. In the first stage, a student inputs preconceived ideas of what he or she believes a student experience will be based on background, previous educational experiences, influence of family and friends and initial contact with the new institution. At this stage, each individual may have a unique view of the new institution's purpose and his/her place in it. In the second stage, the student integrates into the environment—perhaps physically, as in living in the halls of residence, and also actively by becoming involved in programmes and activities that are central to the university's offerings. In the final stage the student progresses to a stage where he/she is able to review how his/her involvement has driven outcomes in skill development, personal development and academic achievement. Alongside these stages of development, Astin maintains that there are 5 required elements of involvement that are all necessary in order to move from one stage to the next:

1. psychosocial and physical energy exerted to engage with the programme
2. continuous involvement on an individual spectrum (not all individuals are involved at the same level)
3. both qualitative and quantitative measurable involvement
4. an understanding that gains (outcomes) are proportional to effort/energy expended on involvement

5. an understanding that there is a direct correlation between student involvement and academic achievement

Astin's theory considers how students take part in their own personal development at university which offers interesting insights into student engagement and how educational institutions can best set the scene to drive forward and support this engagement. It falls short, however, in linking students' engagement to their specific academic course. This link appears to be assumed, i.e. if students are involved outside of the classroom, they must be engaged inside the classroom. Although this may often be the case, the two areas of involvement do not necessarily overlap. Further theories developed after Astin's initial work (Tinto, 1987; Bean & Metzner, 1985; Chickering & Gamson 1987, Berger & Milem 1999, Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, 2005, 2016) broadened the concept of student engagement incorporating different populations and different means of involving students in higher education.

For the purpose of this study, Astin's theory is considered alongside students' academic progress on their modules and alongside evaluations of their academic experience at the University. The theory offers a basic foundation for considering how students involve themselves and integrate within an established academic community within the first year of their four-year course.

My initial visit to the First Year Seminar modules offered in September 2014 was for the purpose of introducing students to the first anonymised survey that would be received over email. They were encouraged both by their instructor and by the researcher to complete it as it would assist us in better evaluating the University's offerings for first year students. The survey was a general questionnaire asking students their reasons for choosing to study at RAIUL and an overview of what they hoped to learn/gain in their first year. This first survey aimed to provide the researcher with a foundation of understanding about the cohort as a whole and how, as individuals, different inputs are brought to the University on behalf of the group. As the students had only just begun their course at RAIUL at the time the surveys were conducted, their pre-conceived notions of what the course might offer and what the students hoped would come out of it were, in theory, entirely individual. Students were offered the opportunity to comment freely without being identified. This method was used to gain an overview of expectations and ideas of the participants in the study. It was a first pass at identifying the cultural foundation upon which the cohort would build their first-year experience. The initial survey

asked for students to choose from pre-selected answers determined by the way in which the University portrayed itself externally (American, international, inclusive, cosmopolitan, etc.), but also allowed participants to introduce their own ideas and pronounce their own affiliations. Although anonymised surveys and questionnaires have their limitations (e.g. potentially biased researcher-led question construction, limited scope for individualised consideration and the hazards of overgeneralising findings) the decision to use this method was based on the value of surveying a single identified group in a limited period of time about pre-supposed assumptions surrounding what students had been told their experience would be. (Oppenheim, 1992) Students completed the survey individually, as it was not conducted during class time, and so the responses should reflect individual thought rather than collective ideas.

In analysing the findings, I will approach the results as though through the eyes of a first-year student and within the theoretical framework of Van Gennep's rites of passage (1909) and ultimately Tinto's theory of student departure (1987). Van Gennep was a Dutch social anthropologist who believed that people who were able to successfully shift from one community to another did so through a series of rituals and rites of passages marked by three clear stages: separation, transition and incorporation (1909). In the first stage, separation, the person distances himself from his old community either by physically leaving or by disassociating himself through lack of communication or irregular interaction. This stage is marked by ceremonies or events hosted by the new community to introduce the new member to the groups' ideologies and priorities. At this stage, the person is often confused and feels uncomfortable in leaving what is familiar to transition to the unknown. Without a means of engaging the new person in the community's agenda, the new member can feel isolated and alone.

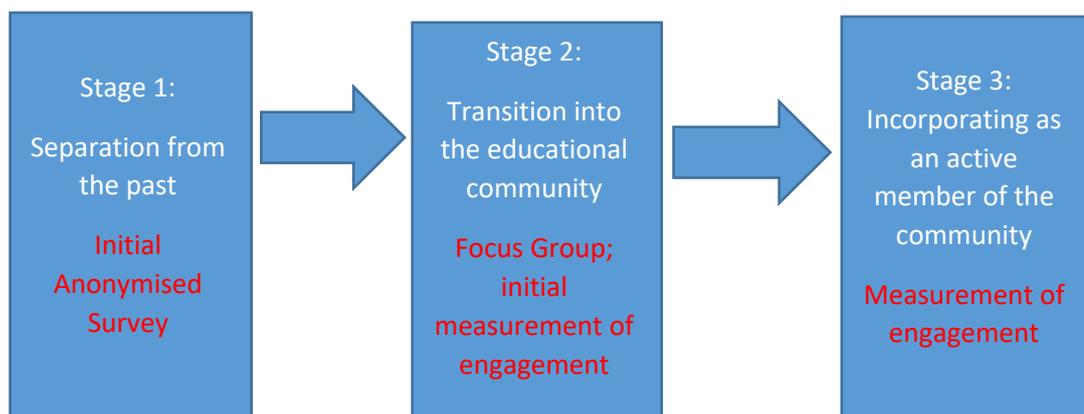
In the second stage, transition, the new member takes on knowledge and skill development offered by the new community in order to play an active role. The new member remains distant from his old community (which can cause him stress and confusion), but at this stage, the new member is evaluating the benefits of membership in the new community and will ultimately make the decision to commit and move on to the next stage or return to his old community.

In the third stage, incorporation, the new member is fully integrated into the new community and plays a clear role with goals and purpose. The new member understands not only the rights of the new community, but also the responsibilities and requirements of

membership. At this stage, the member is fully established within the community and is a competent community member. He may choose to restart communication with his former community, but only with the clear understanding that membership in his new community is his guiding relationship.

Although Van Gennep's theory did not focus on communities of higher education, Vincent Tinto (1987) used Van Gennep's theory to create his own theory of student departures within higher education that mirrors the stages of Van Gennep's rites of passage. Tinto believed that if a student is to complete a course at University, it is important that s/he integrates or incorporates fully both in the academic and social community. This requires three stages of integration: separation, transition and ultimately incorporation.

Tinto first introduced a theory of student development in 1975 which has become a key model by which developmental changes in students are measured in the field. Tinto's theory brought together the earlier works of Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1958) who considered the psychosocial and moral development of children. Tinto combined these theories with the idea of students transitioning between communities where they build membership by engaging with the community's rituals, traditions and activities. Tinto suggested that there are 3 stages of student development within a spectrum: first, separating from the past; second, transitioning into higher education and third, incorporating into society. Similar to Astin's theory of involvement, Tinto's focus is mainly on the measurable activities that engage students in their new communities, however it considers engagement within a broader range of participatory activity including academic, social and personal development which are all intertwined. This study aims to consider students at each stage through this evolution: from individuals through to active members of society and in doing so, it aims to consider their engagement as individuals as well as a group.



In Tinto's study, students who were less integrated found themselves disengaging from their university experience while those who were involved in the academic and social life of the institution progressed on and completed their degrees. Although critics of Tinto's theory believe that it oversimplifies the student experience by not considering the various hurdles different student populations may encounter in engaging with their new community. Tinto's theory focuses almost exclusively on traditional-age, middle class students and not the wider, diverse student population, nevertheless the concepts of transitioning from one phase to another is one that is shared by other researchers in the field of student engagement and development. Astin (1984) further employed the transitional stages of Tinto's theory to showcase the effects of student involvement and the outcomes afforded to those who involve themselves fully in university life. Astin believed that the recipe for transformative learning includes diverse educational offerings and engaged students willing to take part both physically and psychologically. With these two elements firmly in place, according to Astin, the undergraduate university experience can and should be transformative, meaning engaging with it can make an overall change in the student's perspective of the world.

The anonymised survey in this study was created to help students consider their main objectives in attending the University and their expected outcomes of taking part in activities running alongside their academic course. The questions were developed in consultation with the Dean of the School of Liberal Arts and the Coordinator of First Year Programmes as our interests were aligned in better understanding the student population's motivations and reasons for joining the programme. The survey was followed by a focus group, in an attempt to flesh out what effect community engagement and collective community values might have on the student group. As students returned for their second term at Richmond, the subjects of this study were asked to volunteer to participate in a focus group to discuss Richmond's liberal arts course offerings and their perceptions of the course. Students were informed that the focus group would serve to elicit more detailed information from students about their experiences (positive and negative) with the programme over their first one and a half terms at the University and would also be a portion of the research that would contribute to a doctoral thesis at the Institute of Education. The focus group would last between 30 to 40 minutes and could be conducted at the students' convenience. Recruitment was voluntary and following a number of weeks of advertising and publicity through the course leaders, via email and social media, three participants agreed to take part. The three participants were one female US student, one

male US student and one male UK student who roughly mirrored the dominant population of the programme at the time. The participants met in the researcher's office on campus and agreed to have their conversations recorded with the understanding that the transcript would be provided to them following the meeting and the recording would be destroyed so as not to reveal their identities.

The questions were again, developed in consultation with the same members of staff and aimed to incite a conversation about the students' personal experiences and how these shaped their transition into the academic community. The questions were created to inspire the sharing of personal stories of both positive and negative experiences during the first year and asked students to consider the choices they had made and further choices that they might make in future to change their experience. Focus groups allow for researchers to collect a significant amount of data quickly, inexpensively and relatively easily. They can also have the positive side effect of engaging participants who may be less vocal than others in offering opinions or ideas about issues that relate to the larger group (Robson & McCartan, 1993, p284). Focus groups are not without disadvantages, however. They can be limited based on participants' willingness to share confidential information in a group and, if not facilitated properly, can focus on a single individual's ideas as opposed to the group's opinions and ideas which can sometimes lead to conflict. As it was my role to facilitate the focus group, I prepared by establishing rapport with the individuals, carefully explaining the process and expectations of the group and offered equal time and encouragement to each participant. As the University is quite small, the participants all knew each other well and presented themselves at ease in conversation with one another. Although it is tempting to generalise findings from the results of a focus group, making the assumption that the few individuals in the group have the same views as the entire sample is generally not advisable. (Gill and Stewart, 2008) In this case the focus group was used as a means of solidifying students' affiliations with the University and as a tool to measure whether or not engaged students feel that their studies lead to practical outcomes. The participants of the focus group drew on their personal experiences within the community to discuss how being a part of collaborative activities and programmes have shaped the way they view their course and how they identify themselves as community members.

In transitioning to university, students can experience a number of barriers to integration. (Evans et al, 2001) Some of these are predictable: moving away from friends and family, taking on new responsibilities, for example, while others are less predictable—health and wellness, financial struggles, social difficulties.

In keeping with further theories of social inclusion (Tomlinson, 2008) and engagement, the supposed outcome of the focus group would be the development of a shared vision of liberal arts and a group investment into the course objectives. Similarly, conversations within the focus group would potentially demonstrate students moving further along Tinto's spectrum into a transition period. It should be emphasised that the students participating in the focus group were self-selected as the researcher called for volunteers to participate. Self-selection within a focus group is generally regarded as a cause for biased data outcomes as individuals who self-select often bring with them the loudest argument, but not necessarily the consensus of the group (Jacobs, 1989). It could be argued, however, that those who put themselves forward for participation in this group would also likely be those who actively engaged the most with the programme as a whole which is the population this study was looking to consider. Focus groups 'tap a different realm of social reality from one-to-one interviews or questionnaires' because they seek a group consensus (or non-consensus) about issues that affect individuals as well as groups. (Sim, 1998) In which case, the hazards of using a focus group as a means of generalising feedback about a larger, more diverse group is cause for concern. Within this study, the focus group was a means of collecting a portion of the data involved in the study and it was considered alongside surveys, evaluations and quantitative data of engagement activities.

Near the end of the second term of study, the cohort was asked to complete another anonymised survey. This survey was aimed at gauging a change in the students' perceptions of the value of the course, the students' participation in activities related to personal development and skill building and the students' self-perceived achievements over the course of the year. The questions were constructed with the consultation of the staff teaching on the First Year Seminar modules. These included a list of transferrable skills and a list of student engagement activities offered to support skills development. Participants were asked to consider their own first year experience and what they had done personally to take part in these offerings. Again, participation in the survey was voluntary and instructors and peer mentors encouraged students to complete it online. It was suggested that completion of the survey would take between five and eight minutes. It consisted of four basic questions and an option to add free text at the end of the survey in the form of 'any other information'.

The survey was followed by a quantitative measure of student engagement which aimed to show student action as well as thought, incorporating Astin's view of physical and psychosocial engagement. In theory, if students believed that engagement with the

programme as a whole would offer positive outcomes to them, they should also be actively participating in the offerings of the programme. These outcomes would potentially show both individual investment and a social inclusion within smaller peer groups and the larger academic community—completing the final step in the process of integration: incorporating into society. Astin was clear to point out that these actions should be both motivated by a psychological willingness to take part, i.e. a belief that participation in these activities would somehow benefit the student or were in some way valuable to the participant. The choice of which activities to select was partly based on the practicalities of identifying programmes that were trackable but also based on a broad range of offerings that touched on the transferable skills highlighted in the curriculum of the first-year modules.

At the end of each term, students are required to complete an evaluation for each of the modules they are enrolled on at the University. These evaluations are anonymous and are completed in the classroom in the absence of the course instructor. Upon completion, the evaluation is handed to the Dean of the School and these evaluations are considered in departmental assessments and planning. The evaluation has two parts: a set of matrix questions that the students can tick and an open-ended question requesting additional information. Because the core curriculum modules vary widely, I decided to look only at First-Year Seminar module evaluations in order to limit variables related to module content and minimise other external variation related to teaching and the structure of the schools. Finally, students were asked to evaluate their experience of the programme both through their academic work and through services offered to support their student experience. These methods focus both on individual's and the group's ideas and beliefs of liberal arts study and its potential outcomes alongside its overall value proposition.

The final evaluative summary was meant to serve as the students' opportunity to reflect on the course as a whole and to measure their perceptions of the value and worth of the liberal arts programme after a full year of coursework, programmes and activities. The evaluations would also serve to identify, in part, whether or not the beginnings of a cohesive academic community were taking shape and how individuals perceived themselves to be a part of this community or not. The evaluations brought together some of the questions from the initial anonymised survey, elements of the focus group (i.e. community values) and a round up of activities with the projected outcomes of transferrable skills. Potentially the evaluations would serve as a tool to understand whether or not the students believed and engaged with the objectives of a liberal arts education

and if so whether or not they found value in their first-year experiences. Students' ability to identify with the values of the institution as a result of their first year of study and involvement in campus activities should serve to illuminate the main research question of why students choose to study a liberal arts course and further what engages them to continue with this type of study and potentially develop skills for future endeavours.

In summary, the methods used in this study were in three parts: 1. inductive research to infer theoretical concepts and patterns from observed data, i.e. students' affiliations with liberal arts and their feelings concerning its practicality and use, 2. evaluative research to observe the patterns of a cohort and how these compare to individual outcomes and 3. quantitative research to measure the outcomes of success (or failure) on the basis of what the programme sets out to do and how students feel they have achieved these goals or not.

**The data collections calendar**

Date	Data Collection Method
September 2014	Anonymised survey
December 2014	Quantitative engagement review
February 2015	Small Focus Group
April 2015	Anonymised Survey
May 2015	Course evaluations, re-registration/withdrawal summary

## **Chapter 6: The Findings**

The findings were collected over a single academic year (Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 terms) and were evaluated as a whole through the four stages of data collection.

### **Stage 1: Survey 1 (September 2014)**

The initial survey aimed to gauge the students' reasons for choosing RAIUL, their initial perceived value of the liberal arts programme, their active participation/interest in personal development and their affinity and affiliation with the mission and values of the institution as a whole. The questions were devised to be short, tick-box answers with the option to add additional information in a free-text box. Students were informed initially by me personally via class visits, but also by the instructor and later via email, about an anonymous e-survey they would be receiving via email and they were encouraged (both by their instructor and by the researcher) to complete it. Participants were told that completing the survey would take no more than three minutes and all responses would be anonymous within the cohort. The feedback would enable the University to make changes to the programme that could positively affect the student experience. It would also feature as a portion of the research used in a doctor thesis.

During the time the survey ran (over a 2-week period), reminders were sent electronically and the survey was also promoted by faculty, peer mentors and electronically over email. At the end of the two-week period, forty-eight students (about 30% of the total population) had responded with the following results:

**1. Why did you choose to study at Richmond? (tick as many as apply)**

29% London Location

28% Dual Accredited

14% Options for Work Experience

12% Flexible degree plan

7% alumni connections

Other: sense of community, (small) size, diverse student body, financial assistance, uniqueness

**2. What do you consider the most valuable parts of the liberal arts degree programme? (tick as many as apply)**

28% well-rounded education

24% ability to be creative/ innovative

20% options to learn skills for employment

13% make learning 'fun' or meaningful

11% rewards and challenges of interdisciplinary study

Other: allows you to consider your options before making a final decision about what you want to do; close interaction between teacher and student; lets people

who aren't sure what they want to do in life find out rather than having to make the decision before you get there; 'I don't think it's a valuable system'; '...only when the course actually relates to your major'; 'none—I prefer more technical schools'

**3. Do you currently participate or plan to participate in any of the following activities/ offerings? (Tick as many as apply)**

29% work experience, volunteering, internships

24% student clubs and societies

15% careers-related seminars

15% student employment

12% leadership opportunities

Other: none—not enough time; entrepreneurship; music; travelling and exploring

**4. Do you believe these skills (critical thinking, research and writing, interdisciplinary study, flexibility, adaptability, resilience, etc) will help you later in your course/ life?**

69% Yes

19% Probably

4% Not Sure

8% Don't think so

**5. How closely do you relate to the mission of the University? (The mission and vision were included as part of this question, so the participants had the opportunity to review them before answering.)**

52% Closely

46% In Part

2% Not at all

The free text comments in response to the first question of the initial student survey underline what students viewed as the positive elements of membership. In response to the question: 'Why did you choose to study at Richmond University?' responses included, '[it has a] sense of community, '[I like the] diverse student population and the uniqueness [of the degree plans]'. Each of these elements describe reasons why membership was important to students at the time of their arrival and why they made the choice to join. In response to the questions about taking part in activities and offerings, however, the comments were less positive. Students struggled with the idea of value being ascribed to developing skills through activities and offerings that appeared peripheral or indeed entirely outside of the scope of the academic portion of their course. Some students, particularly those interviewed later in the focus group, appeared to show positive integration with their course and the community. They spoke positively about their roles in student leadership and their plans to 'get more involved', but the same students referred

to others who were less engaged as disruptive to the academic community. Withdrawal surveys conducted at the time students decided to leave the course emphasised a 'lack of community' or a feeling that the University needed to consider how to improve 'the atmosphere' to bring people together.

The results of this survey seem to indicate that the two features that most attracted students to the University are the offer of London (as a vibrant capital city) and Richmond's unique US/UK dual degree programme. These two elements of the Richmond experience are front and centre in the University's marketing of its degree programmes, so it is not surprising for students to have chosen them as attractive features. They are, perhaps, the most evident differentiating factors that set the University apart from its competitors. Students further felt that having a breadth of studies and options to be creative and innovative were important motivating factors in encouraging them to join the University's academic community. This indicates an understanding of the purpose of a liberal arts degree programme and a further understanding of student expectations as outlined in the University's marketing materials. 98% of students surveyed also felt they related in some part to the University's mission to educate students in the liberal arts tradition and to promote leadership and service both within the degree programme and post-graduation. The activities within the programme students seemed most keen to participate in were those that linked transferrable skills most overtly to their academic modules: work experience and student leadership activities.

Further 88% of the students surveyed felt the activities that they had chosen or hoped to participate in later would likely become useful later in life. What students have further indicated, however is that community, the support for students and the offer of 'uniqueness' were also attractive features in choosing to study at Richmond University as opposed to another institution. This is the first indication of 'difference' as a positive trait of the liberal arts degree course as opposed to 'difference' as a departure or distraction from something more standard or traditional. One student commented that 'uniqueness' was an attractive feature of the academic programme—further indicating that being different is desirable. But what makes 'difference' attractive from the student perspective? Thinking differently is a means of being innovative and creative. (Shaughnessy, 2012) These traits are held as valuable because with them comes the ability to craft, produce and manage ideas. In thinking differently, students must employ transferrable skills like flexibility, adaptability, creative problem solving and innovation to discuss world issues. As Kahneman (2011) describes, our complex societies require agile minds that can be flexible

and innovative in considering interrelated problems and issues. These skills, more practical than academic in nature, are often not considered as important or valuable in higher education as constructing an academic argument, researching and analysing or writing an academic paper because they are less 'academic' in nature. Their value, however, is in their transferability to any number of careers or indeed any further course of study or scholarship.

Richmond's mission highlights the goal of preparing graduates for careers of social impact and with this preparation comes skill development. Leadership roles require some practical skills. Prospects (AGCAS, 2018), the UK's graduate outcomes magazine, lists the seven skills successful manager/leaders require as the following: interpersonal skills, a good grasp of communication and an understanding of motivation, organisation and delegation skills, forward planning and strategic thinking, problem solving and decision-making skills, commercial awareness, and mentoring skills. These skills coincide with the transferrable skills purposefully taught through the First-Year Programmes at Richmond and developed in the activities and offerings that complement the academic modules.

In addition to being different, creative and having the opportunity to study subjects broadly, students also felt that the opportunity to build skills for employment and to develop leadership abilities were valuable assets to the University's programme.

Richmond's vision and mission highlight the University's aim of preparing graduates for careers in leadership that have a social impact on the communities around them. It seems new students found these ideals both positive and engaging.

#### Stage 2: Engagement Review (December 2014)

At the end of the first term of study, numbers were collated of students participating in personal development activities that were offered in collaboration with the academic programme. These activities were devised to promote practical skill building and were chosen based on access to reliable data, but certainly do not feature all of the engagement activities on offer at the time this research was conducted. The activities do include a variety of offerings, however: participation in student leadership seminars, attendance at co-curricular events and activities, participation in student-run clubs and societies, involvement in voluntary work, participation in student representation on University committees and employment through the University's student employment scheme. The results show the following:

Activity/Programme	Raw Number of Participants	Percentage of the Cohort
Student Leadership Seminars	426 across 9 seminars	86% capacity of events (a further 14% of the student population chose not to participate)
Co-curricular Events & Activities	15	9%
Participation in Clubs/Societies	38	24%
Student Representation	4	2%
Student Employment	2	1%

At this stage, I attempted to measure students' physical engagement in activities designed to support personal development and in doing so, I aimed to discover the students' perceived value of each purposeful activity or initiative. Given the results, it seems that the students' ideas of what is valuable and what is not relates very closely to their own individual needs and interests. The Student Leadership Seminars were offered in conjunction with their First-Year module and so the alignment of the academic programme and student support were, perhaps, most overt. Student Leadership Seminars aimed to link classroom discussions and activities with opportunities to work through practical projects for skill building. As these seminars were introduced to students in the classroom, the connection between relevancy and utility of these activities appears to have been clearer than some of the others. Participation in student-run clubs and societies features as an area of student engagement for almost a quarter of the population. Although the connection between practical skill development and participation is less overt, the social integration side of this aspect of student leadership appears to be a big draw for students as well.

### Stage 3: Focus Group (February 2015)

The focus group of three was informal and conversational, but it was semi-structured around 6 main questions. Each participant was encouraged to give his/her perspective. The questions included:

1. Why did you choose to enrol at Richmond? What was the deciding factor when it came time to choose? What were your expectations of what your first year might bring?
2. After a term and a bit at Richmond, would you say that your initial expectations met reality? Why or why not?
3. Richmond's first year student experience is meant to engage students in University life fully. What steps did you take to engage yourself in what the University had to offer? (you may wish to consider student clubs, residence life, student representation, events, activities, drama, music, etc.)
4. The aim of a liberal arts curriculum is to provide a foundation of skills that will support students in their development as independent learners. The skills that the core curriculum strives to teach, train and enhance are: flexibility, adaptability, awareness of diversity, self-reflection and motivation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication and negotiation, etc.) Can you think of activities, events or programmes in which you were given opportunities to build these skills (inside and/or outside of the classroom). Please elaborate.
5. What are your motivations moving forward in your degree programme? Do you see yourself becoming more or less engaged in University life? What are your plans for the coming academic year?
6. If you had it to do again, what would you change about your first-year experience? Are there things you would do differently? What? Why? Are there things you think the University should do differently? What? Why?

Questions were sent via email to participants three days before the meeting and students were told that they did not need to prepare, only to consider the questions before the group met. The focus group itself lasted about 30 minutes and was conducted in a comfortable setting away from the hub of university activity, but still on campus. The interviews were recorded (with the understanding that the recordings would be destroyed once transcribed so as not to identify any of the participants by voice). Throughout the conversation, participants were asked to consider the liberal arts course, its main benefits (if any) and their engagement with it. They were also asked to consider their own predicted outcomes of the courses and how these might be realised in a practical form. Although the three participants had some different views, they all spoke about their course and experiences including their views about how modules were chosen and conducted and options versus mandatory requirements for engagement. These features were further identified in the course evaluations later in the term.

Three main trends or themes emerged within the focus group that specifically related to the research questions. In considering the students' responses, I looked for both consistencies and diversions in the statements of the three participants and found that where the option to take part and the requirements for engagement were concerned there was notable consistency on how they viewed their degree course. These three themes were developed by the group in response to questions about each individual's motivations and their personal experiences, but as the conversations continued, they seemed to offer a generalised view of student engagement with the programme and the offer as well.

All three participants agreed that in order to make the most of their university experience, they needed to personally invest themselves in the programme. This included time, energy and underlying motivation.

*'I think moving abroad to study at a place like Richmond requires a certain type of personality and people who are ambitious and interested do fine. I think the students who don't have these qualities will struggle and may decide this isn't the place for them.'* (student 1)

*'I was really most excited about studying in London. I wanted to find ways to use the city as part of my degree... I have found ways to do this, but ... you have to work a lot of that out for yourself.'*(student 3)

The physical and psychological effort and initiative as identified by Tinto (1987) in his student integration model featured as a key indicator of success within the programme amongst participants in the focus group. Those who put the effort into identifying and participating in activities, programmes and other initiatives that they perceived as meaningful to their development found the experiences positive and fulfilling. Conversely the participants felt that students lacking initiative, who were disengaged with the programme, caused discord in the community and served to drive the community apart.

All three participants also agreed that not all students at the University were willing to take part and that this caused problems within the community.

*'I think there are lots of opportunities for students to get involved...meet each other, learn and do something different, but not everyone wants to do it. There are some really motivated, dedicated, ambitious students, but there are also a lot who aren't and that hurts the experience for everyone.'* (student 1)

*'People like to complain about things not happening, but they don't want to do anything to change it.'* (student 2)

All three participants in the focus group perceived themselves to be actively participating in university life in contrast to a number of their peers who were not. As active participation exists on a spectrum, it is unlikely that all three participants were equally as engaged as the next, but their negative feelings toward those who they perceived as disengaged were unanimous. This meant a divide within the community causing a disruption to those actively engaged in a positive student experience.

Much of the students' aspirations and hopes for the future had to do with their own perceived abilities to take part in programmes and services –both in their core academic experience and outside of it—that is participants believed that taking initiative and playing an active role in University life are vital indicators of success

*'I think the core classes helped me see things from a different perspective, but you don't always feel that way when you're in the middle of them....I think if you commit to them (the modules) you can change the way you think and really appreciate what you have more. It's like seeing things from a 360 degree view instead of just one angle.'*(student 3)

*'Students think that the job of professors is to engage them and although this makes a great professor, it is the responsibility of students to want to learn.'*  
(student 2)

Although it may be the requirement of the institution to create the environment by which students can initiate active participation, the participants were in agreement that much, if not all, of the beneficial outcomes of participation rely almost exclusively on the individual's ability to initiate and sustain personal engagement.

*'I've met a lot of interesting people, but you have to put yourself out there.'* (student 2)

*'I wanted to find ways to use the city as part of my degree...if you know what I mean. I have found ways to do this, but like (subject 2) said, you have to work a lot of that out for yourself.'*

As Tinto explained, the more physical and psychological investment a student puts into their experience, the greater the positive benefits as a whole. (1987)

Stage 4: Survey 2 (April 2015)

The second anonymised survey followed the focus group and was sent to all students registered on a First-Year Seminar. Thirty-six students completed the survey during the two-week window which is a total of 23% of the cohort.

Students were asked to rank how the programmes and support mechanisms contributed to their course of study. These included:

**-The First Year Programme:** the academic module itself and all of the in-class resources provided to the students enrolled on the course.

**-The Personal Development Plan (PDP):** a precursor to the curriculum vitae, the PDP is meant to document skill-building, both academic and personal, by articulating growth in key areas such as communications skills, research and analytical skills and presentation skills.

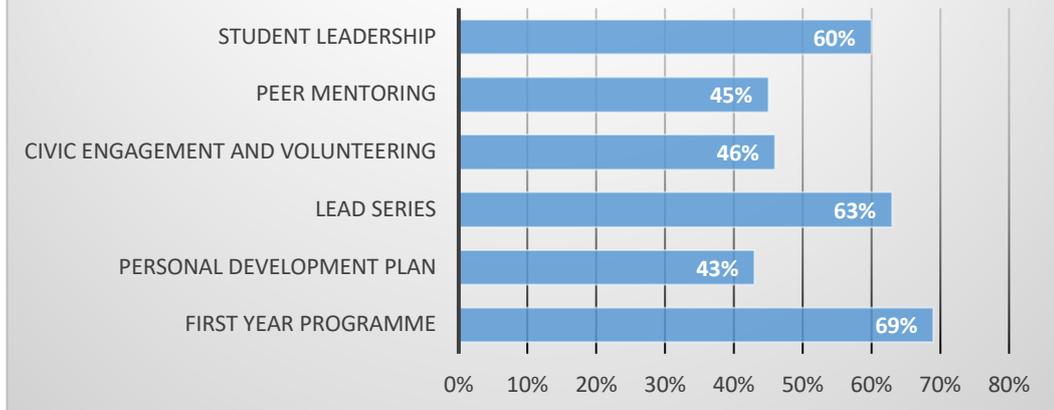
**-The LEAD (Leadership Education and Development) Series:** were a series of seminars offered by Student Affairs staff in an attempt to link classroom activities to external personal development activities. They included CV workshops, interviewing skills, and a workshop on transferrable skills amongst other presentations

**-Civic Engagement/Volunteering:** voluntary service was introduced on a micro-level (8 hours in total) as a required part of the First Year Programme in 2015. It was introduced as a means of encouraging students to pursue active participation and citizenship as a pivotal part of their academic course. It should be noted that 41% of survey participants felt that civic engagement/volunteering did not contribute at all to their course and offered comments that show frustrations with this course element. Civic engagement, although an important part of the liberal arts curriculum requires building connections outside of the close, comfortable, inclusive campus environment and this may be perceived as disruptive, intrusive and even a road block to students' transition to integration.

**-Peer Mentoring:** mentoring is the peer to peer support offered through the First Year Programme. It aims to integrate academic support alongside social integration. Peer mentors model engaged student behaviour and work with first year students to integrate them into the academic community.

**-Student Leadership:** these activities comprise engagement in student-run clubs and societies, student representation, on-campus employment including mentoring and tutoring and general campus engagement in events and activities.

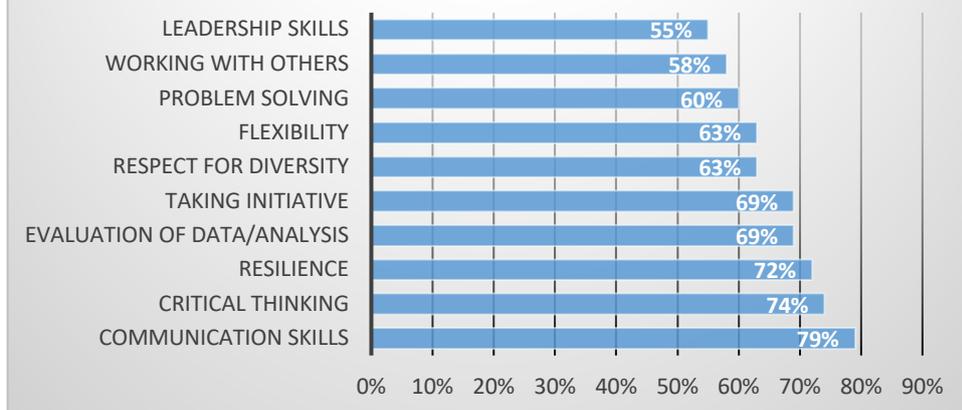
## Do you believe the following programmes/events/activities have contributed to your course?\*



\*responses indicate contributed positively/ somewhat positively

Perhaps not surprisingly, the three key areas that students felt contributed most positively to their course were all required activities needed to fulfil the learning outcomes of the First-Year Seminar, meaning without participation in these activities students would not have been able to successfully pass the module nor could they earn credit for it. Engagement might, therefore, seem artificial given that these activities required participation, but students' responses also show, in part, that as consumers and participants in the course, the activities were felt to be useful. If nothing else, when expectations of purpose and reason are made clear to students, a higher rate of engagement is achieved.

## Rank the following skills according to your achievements this year\*



\* percentages are a result of the respondents ranking their skills as 'highly developed', 'developed' and 'partly developed'

The skills which ranked most highly in students' minds, much like the previous question, make up a list of those that appear to be taught most overtly in the classroom, i.e. activities and assessments in the classroom were intentionally chosen and students were informed of how these activities and assessments related specifically to the development of the skills on this list. For communication skills, for example, students were required to give a presentation in the classroom about a research topic for which they were required to work with other students. Some of the skills on the list are more nebulous (like flexibility or respect for diversity) than others, but given the range, it appears that those which could be pinpointed through student activities and assessment were ranked most highly.



\*The rankings are a result of respondents' self-evaluation of 'substantial progress, 'good progress' and 'some progress'.

Students' main areas of personal development, not unlike the previous question, also appear to be areas where they have been required by the module's assessment criteria to

show growth. As is true of the previous questions, the top three answers are related to activities structured intentionally within the First-Year Seminar to hone these individualised skills: Self-reflection within the Personal Development Plan, Structuring an academic argument: within the group research project and Basic Study Skills: within discussions of time management and ways to study smartly.



\*these responses are a ranking of most common results for 'needs more improvement/development'

For areas where students felt they needed the most improvement, there were a variety of responses. Some of these would indicate confusion about the First-Year Programme and its aims to work with students to gain both practical skills and theoretical knowledge in that each of these skills were woven into the course on some level. In addition, further responses would indicate that those activities and assessments intentionally taught to produce skills development did not entirely register as useful opportunities to grow or learn something new. Students did not see a connection between their coursework and skill development.

Ten students chose to write in additional comments on the survey: three of these were positive affirmations of the course and four were negative.

Positive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-I feel better prepared for the working world than others who haven't taken part in a liberal arts course because of the flexibility of the programme</li> <li>-The liberal arts education sets RAIUL apart from other UK universities and I believe it positively enhances learning</li> <li>-I feel like the international environment adds to the learning and the liberal arts education enhances your skills for entering work in a global community</li> </ul>
Negative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Not challenging enough</li> <li>-Lack of student engagement makes important programmes seem pointless</li> <li>-I have been treated like a child—I have no academic independence; I have to take subjects I have no interest in</li> <li>-FYS (First Year Seminar) is a completely useless waste of time—I could have been doing another course that would have contributed to my major</li> </ul>

The free text responses show divergent opinions on the value of the general, skills-based curriculum. Those who choose to engage with it, it would appear, see the activities and programmes as useful, flexible and an added enhancement to their academic course. Those who do not engage with it see it as pointless, infantile and generally a waste of time.

#### Stage 5: Course (Module) Evaluations & Withdrawal reports (May 2015)

These course (module) evaluations consisted of 155 student evaluations across two terms of classes: Fall 2014 and Spring 2015. In Fall 2014, the following First Year Seminar courses ran with the following student numbers.

The Philosophy of Ethics: 26

Community & Volunteering: 30 (Section A 20, Section B 10)

Planet Pioneers: 15

Sport in Society: 28 (Section A 17, Section B 11)

**Total for Fall 14 = 99**

In Spring 2015, the following courses ran with the following student numbers:

Community & Volunteering: 31 (Section A 15, Section B 16)

Sport in Society: 8

The Philosophy of Ethics: 17

**Total for Spring 2015: 56**

The questions asked in the course/module evaluations are standardised across all departments of the University and are aimed at eliciting feedback from students to make improvements to course offerings, quality of teaching and materials/facilities used as part of the module. All students are asked to complete module evaluations at the end of each term, but as the evaluations are anonymised, it is not always possible to achieve a 100% return. At the time these evaluations were conducted, they were in paper form and

delivered by a member of the registry services office without the instructor being present. The chart below collates all of the evaluations across the two terms for all of the modules in the First-Year programme.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I knew what the course set out to achieve	41%	56%	3%		
For me, the course delivered what it set out to achieve	37%	62%	1%		
The course content was up-to-date	37%	58%	3%	1%	1%
The level of difficulty of this course was appropriate	38%	59%	2%	1%	
The workload for this course was appropriate	38%	59%	3%		
The requirements of each assignment were clear	50%	47%	2%	1%	
Assessment of my work was fair	55%	42%	3%		
The feedback on my work was prompt	38%	59%	3%	1%	
The feedback on my work was useful	37%	42%	20%	1%	
I received useful feedback in addition to written comments on coursework/exams	42%	36%	21%	1%	
For me, the instructor promoted critical/analytical thinking	59%	40%	1%		
The instructor was knowledgeable about the subject	69%	31%			
The instructor communicated effectively	67%	29%	4%		
I found the instructor approachable	71%	25%	4%		
The instructor engaged me in the subject	63%	34%	3%		
The instructor started and finished the class on time	33%	44%	16%	7%	
Learning resources were adequate for this course	44%	42%	14%		
I learned a lot in this course	55%	36%	9%		
The instructor taught this course well	69%	28%	3%		

The areas where students felt most positively surrounded the confidence they felt in their instructor (knowledgeableness, preparedness, communication effectiveness and the clarity and fairness of assessment). A majority felt that they learned ‘a lot’ from the course and they also felt that the course was both engaging and promoted critical thinking skills which

are central tenants of the liberal arts core. Less positive rankings showed some discontent with written feedback on student work and the logistics of running a course.

Although the majority of students did not complete the free text portion of the survey, those we did followed one of three significant trends:

**1. Students felt that this required course was not necessary and generally a ‘waste of time’**

‘pointless’

‘I could have spent my time doing more interesting things’

‘(topics in the class) were often not relevant’

‘I personally think this class is quite pointless’

‘The course didn’t teach me anything. It was useful only for the 4 credits’

‘I felt it was a waste of money to be honest’

‘the class should be more practical and stimulating...’

‘less pointless work’

‘felt like a pointless class, getting us to do old fashioned things we’ve all done in school’

‘I learnt nothing, it was a waste of time’

**2. Students did not understand the connection between this course and their degree programme**

‘lack of organisation about what we are meant to be learning and why’

‘I don’t want to take classes that I have zero interest in’

‘I’m not sure what the subject of the course is’

‘some of the activities were unnecessary...’

‘some info is useless’

‘a lot of content was obvious and not challenging’

**3. Students commented that the course was engaging, useful and relevant in developing ‘other’ skills**

‘I found the support for study skills useful’

‘...helped me to transition into uni life’

‘my instructor made the topics interesting and relevant’

‘useful experience’

‘(this class) got me into different activities which were helpful’

‘the course is interesting. I learned how to find and improve my skills. I learned how to appreciate myself’

‘(the instructor was) very engaging and knowledgeable and made the class fun’

‘I enjoyed the assignment and the amount of group work allowed an introduction into Richmond’

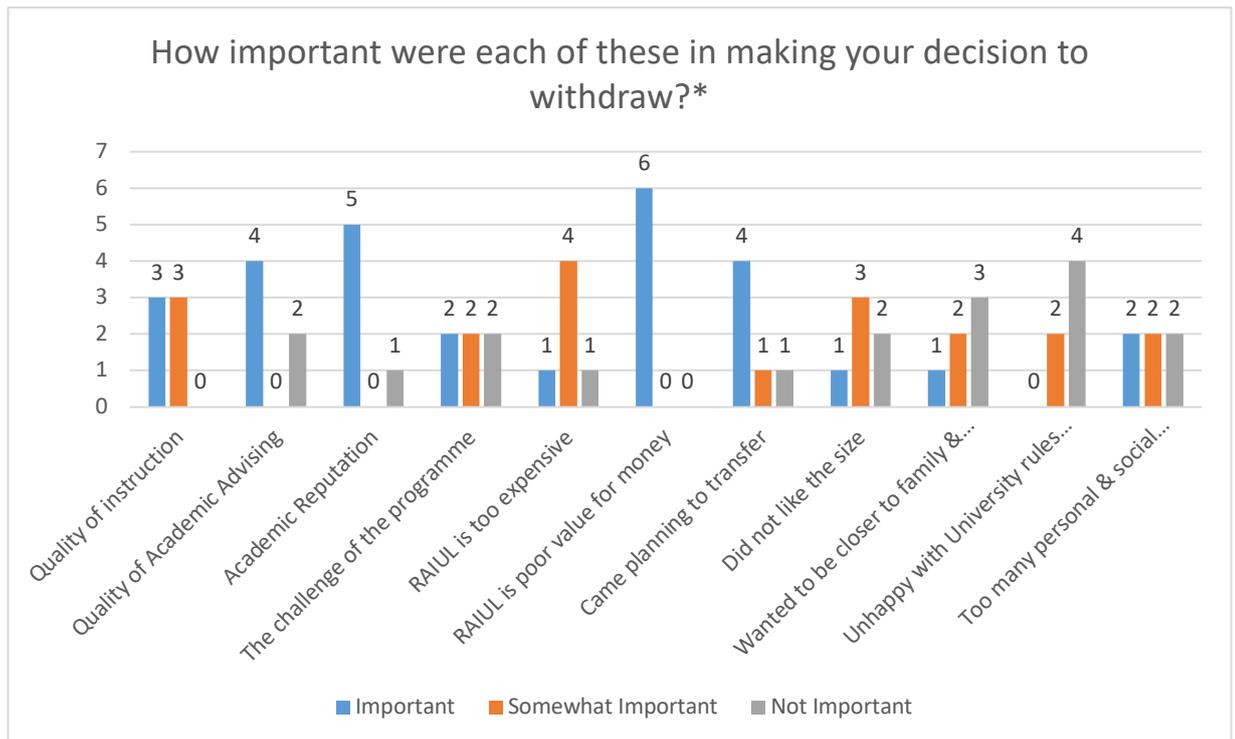
‘very up-to-date and reliable examples’

The divergent opinions here appear to indicate that for a number of students, engaging in a programme that aims to deliver personal skill development is not something they believe to be relevant or useful or the skills that the programme promotes are not perceived to be

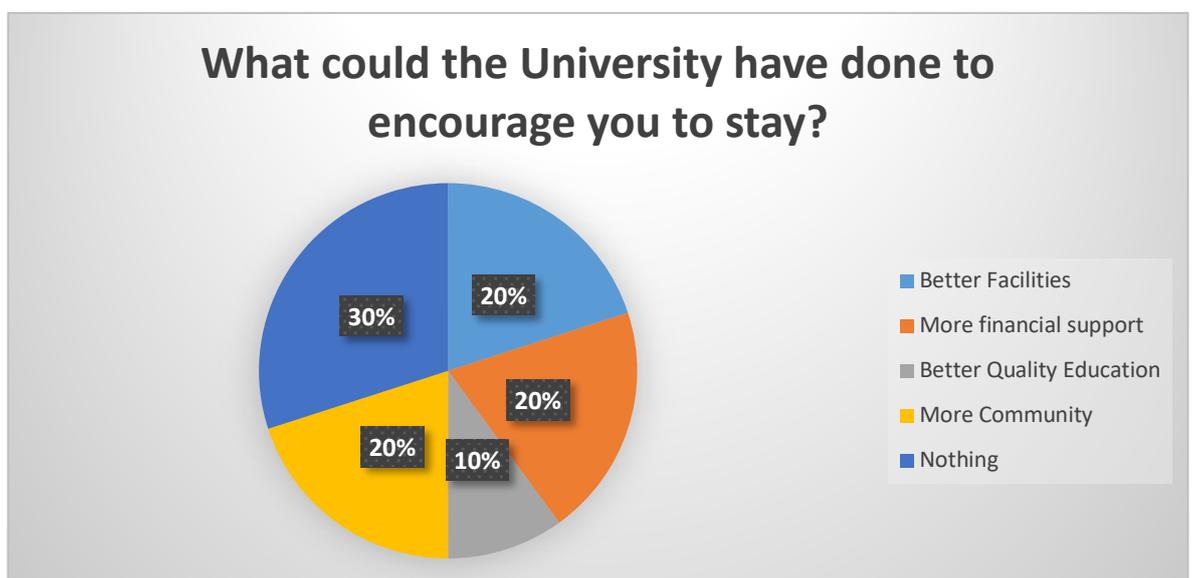
useful. It appears that those who choose to engage with the programme and see its relevance believe in its utility and practicality as it relates to the academic course.

Following the end of the term, an analysis of the achievement, persistence and progression of the 155 participants took place. Nine students withdrew from the programme (5 UK, 3 EU and 1 International student). Their reasons consisted of variations of three main trends: the course was ‘not right’ for me, the community and courses did not support me or prepare me as I expected and financial/family-related issues require me to return home. The generalised portion of the survey indicated that value for money was an important concern for students choosing to leave the institution and the perception that RAIUL offers poor value for money may have a connection to students’ understandings (or perhaps misunderstandings) of the practicalities of the course.

<p>What is your main reason for withdrawing?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-too small of a university</li> <li>-I’ve realized that this school is not the right fit for me</li> <li>-the school is in a great location, but it doesn’t offer the services and support a typical college would</li> <li>-I personally don’t believe this University is giving the right skills for students to enter the job force</li> <li>-the liberal arts system didn’t work well for me and I wanted to be closer to home.</li> </ul>
<p>What could Richmond have done to encourage you to stay at the University?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-(provide a) better campus, better classrooms, more community, better dorms, a sense of pride to be going to Richmond</li> <li>-Provide more financial aid and scholarships to make education more economical</li> <li>-nothing—the education quality is unacceptable</li> <li>-Incorporate more of a community atmosphere to Richmond</li> </ul>



\*of the 9 students who withdrew from the University, each selected how important the pre-selected reasons were in making their decision to leave. Each respondent could select as many reasons as applied to them and their relevance.



Of the 146 students who successfully completed the first-year modules, 123 (84%) achieved a grade point average <sup>29</sup>of 2.0 or above which enabled them to continue on to their next year of study without academic penalty. 23 of the 146 failed to achieve above a

<sup>29</sup> A US 'GPA' or grade point average is the cumulative average of all module grades throughout the student's period of study. An A grade equates to a 4, a B a 3, a C a 2 and so on. In order to be a student in good standing, i.e. passing the course, a student must achieve a GPA of 2.0 or better throughout their degree programme.

2.0 grade point average (which is considered passing) and so were placed on academic probation to monitor their progress in the next term. The institutional retention rate for the University was 74% at the end of the 2014-2015 academic year, so this subsection of the population performed above the average by institutional standards with a retention rate of 94% within the cohort.

Tinto's theory of student departures is a starting point by which to attempt to make sense of the high retention rate within this programme. According to Tinto, students who do not achieve some level of academic or social integration are more likely to leave than those who feel a connection to the institution because of having engaged with its academic and social experience. (1987) This is with the recognition that membership within an academic community exists on a spectrum by which students will engage with some, but not all of the offerings and that their individual interactions with the community can define some of its features.

'...we recognize that the process of integration in college is an interactive one in which individuals also act to reshape their environments.' (Tinto, 1987, 106)

Student engagement with a community at the level by which students are actively taking part as agents in creating their own positive experience offers opportunities for transformative learning and the role in 'finding a niche' at University. (Browler, 1992)

## Chapter 7: Discussion of Findings

The five research questions this study aimed to consider were:

1. **Why do students choose a liberal arts-style degree course as opposed to other types of undergraduate study?**
2. **What are the perceived benefits of the course from the students' perspective?**
3. **How are these benefits realised in study and activity outside of the classroom?**
4. **How does student engagement relate to student success if at all?**
5. **What practical measurable skills do students develop in their first year and what value is attributed to these skills?**

The first question was considered initially in the context of individuals reporting their choice to attend Richmond University. It was later re-interrogated through focus groups, anonymised surveys and through the students' commitment (or lack thereof) to participate in activities that contributed to their course. The choice to study on a liberal arts degree appeared to students on this programme to be a choice to do something 'different'.

*I thought it [coming to Richmond] would be a good chance for me to get away from home and do something **different**. I graduated (from high school) last year and I saw a lot of my friends sticking around. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to meet people from **different** cultures and try to see things from **different** angles.*

*My Richmond degree will translate back to the US, but it gives me the opportunity to study abroad and see things **differently**. I didn't want to stay at home only to live and study with the same group of people. Richmond sort of gave me the chance to do something **different**.*

Opting for difference is a conscious decision to join a community that is divergent from expectations and with different choices and opportunities. In choosing 'difference' it is, perhaps, inevitable that some participants will fail to integrate as the grade for joining in or fitting in is quite steep. Rating the programme as 'useless', 'not relevant' or even 'a waste of time' suggests a lack of understanding of what the programme aims to accomplish or perhaps simply a lack of trust or belief that the programme will deliver the results it sets out to do. The students who made these comments did not find value in the liberal arts offer and left their first year feeling dissatisfied and unfulfilled because they disassociated themselves with the University's offerings. Building a sense of community for all to participate within was clearly an area of struggle. Finding 'fit' within an offering that holds 'difference' as a key focus, it seems, can be a distraction.

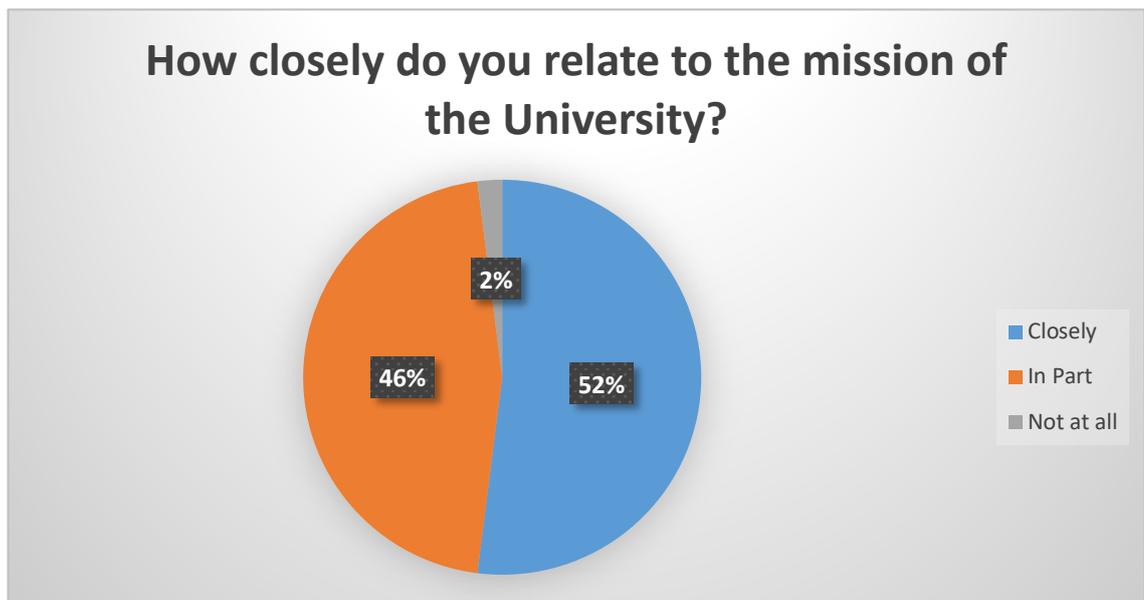
In their 1986 publication 'Sense of Community: a Definition and Theory' McMillan and Chavis (1986) condensed community engagement into two basic elements: social bonding and behavioural rootedness. Social bonding is the feeling of being connected and aligned to a group or even a subset of people within a group. By bonding socially, members feel a part of the community and are optimistic that the group's actions and activities are worthwhile, particularly those accomplished collectively. When bonding socially, members see purpose and meaning within the unit and share values and overarching ideas about the community. Students who took part in the initial survey about their reasons for choosing a liberal arts course indicated eagerness to be a part of a programme with a 'sense of community' and further cited positive affiliations with the opportunity to take part in a 'well-rounded education' within a 'multicultural environment'. The focus group participants further cemented their feelings of social bonding through their conversations about student engagement within the programme and how the initiatives of the active student population support the overall ethos of liberal arts education. They further found some agreement in concerns about their peers who opted not to participate and how this inaction frustrated the community and detracted from the group's sense of community.

Behavioural rootedness, much like social bonding, is about finding individual fit within the larger community. This can be perhaps a place or a specific role or a duty that generates a feeling of integration. As rootedness is about roles and security, it also follows on that members of the community who feel rooted adhere to the values of membership and feel anchored and supported within their community. Although a portion of the population found fit with the liberal arts community's ethos, divergent attitudes about the worth of activities made it difficult or even impossible for some students to integrate.

The four elements of a community according to McMillan and Chavis are: **membership** (investing in joining a group because of similar values, ideas or even location), **influence** (having the ability to bring people within the community together and effect change when desired), **integration & fulfilment of needs** (feeling a part of a larger group with established motivations, hopes and aspirations and the opportunity to find outlets to ensure personal interests are addressed) and finally **emotional connectedness** (the element of fit in which the community member feels personal ties to the community that are based on positive feelings of integration.)

Within the first survey, respondents were asked about their affiliations with the University's mission to 'offer knowledge and support to help students to think critically, the

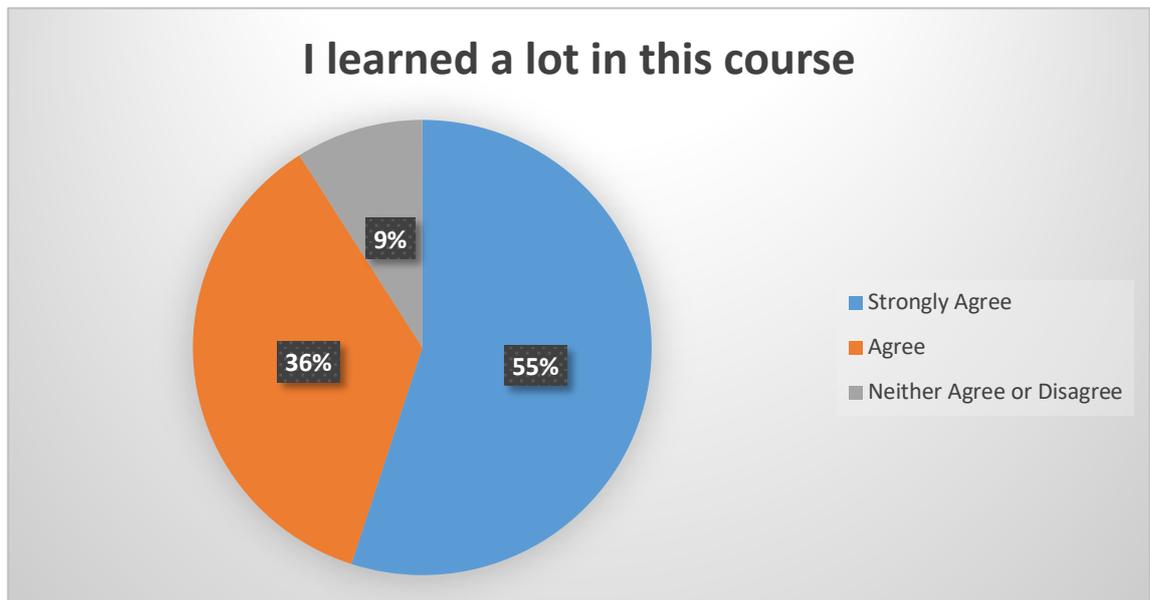
freedom to challenge assumptions and the skills to work together'. Just over half of the participants responded that they related closely to the University's mission while a further 46% related in part. Only 2% felt that they could not relate at all. This would seem to indicate that early integration with the community was strong and the seeds of student engagement and membership within the community were being sown within the first several weeks of the new term. In short, students involved in this study generally chose the course because of the appeal of doing something different within a supportive, inclusive environment.



**What are the perceived benefits of the course from the students' perspective? And how are these benefits realised in study and activity outside of the classroom?**

It seems clear from the earliest survey that at the time of joining the University, students felt a personal motivation to become members of the academic community. They were excited to be in London and eager to start their coursework. They offered positive comments about the challenges ahead and saw membership in their new community as interesting and different. The programmes and services built around the first-year experience were offered in an attempt to support integration within the community (careers workshops, student clubs and societies and other leadership activities) and were used by some of the students who identified with the purpose and utility of the offerings. Those who chose to take part in these activities demonstrated some of the influence that McMillan and Chavis described by encouraging their peers to get involved, seek opportunities to play a role in the community and be a part of more than just classroom interactions.

Student needs fulfilment as described in the final survey and course evaluations were largely met as they related to knowledge transfer and academic and personal skill development. Students commented that they had ‘learned a lot’ and felt that the coursework was ‘useful’ and ‘interesting’.



Those we did not engage positively with the course felt disappointed and frustrated with what they felt was ‘a waste of time’. Finally, the emotional connectedness required to bring a community together was not entirely found in the feedback offered by students. Some saw their first-year experience as positive and fulfilling. Others, however, failed to connect and were left feeling that, on the whole, the first-year module was ‘pointless’. McMillan and Chavis’ framework for community building offers us some insight into the mechanism by which students integrate (or do not) into their academic community.

If we return to the students’ initial engagement with the University and the students’ first step into ‘membership’, we must return to the University’s mission, vision and values. The mission and vision of the University highlight the value of critical thought in its many facets, freedoms to challenge assumptions by thinking ‘differently’ and skill building as an important and immediate part of each student’s degree course. The University’s mission also highlights Richmond University’s obligation to provide an engaging academic course to encourage students’ active participation in the work of the academic community and the world around them. Initial perceptions of the value of these commitments were very positive and students’ comments about their choice indicated positive engagement and hopeful anticipation in what was to come. When asked ‘What do you consider the most valuable parts of the liberal arts degree programme?’ students responded with almost

equal weighting that they were in search of a 'well-rounded education'; that they were interested in the 'ability to be creative/innovative' and that they wanted the 'options to learn skills for employment.' These three objectives appear to bring the somewhat cryptic idea of a differently- styled, broad education and the practical skills required for employment together in a single educational outcome which, by all rights, is exactly what a liberal arts education aims to do. In higher education this age-old controversy of practical learning versus theoretical knowledge is at the heart of liberal arts study and by seeing the two as distinct and different, students will inevitably feel isolated and confused by a programme that aims to bring the two together.

'There are barriers in our society erected by a false dichotomy between practical work and theoretical reflection. The distinction between the practical and the theoretical is used to warehouse society into groups. It alienates and divides.'  
(Stanley 2012)<sup>30</sup>

This division between 'thinkers' and 'doers' perpetuates the idea that higher education cannot (or maybe even should not) offer practical training or skills-based learning objectives as this is not its ultimate goal. In a recent podcast for Times Higher Education, FE Principal Eddie Playfair termed this dichotomy 'senseless'.

'The implied polarity between skills and knowledge doesn't make sense at the course level and it makes even less sense at the human level.' (Playfair 2019)<sup>31</sup>

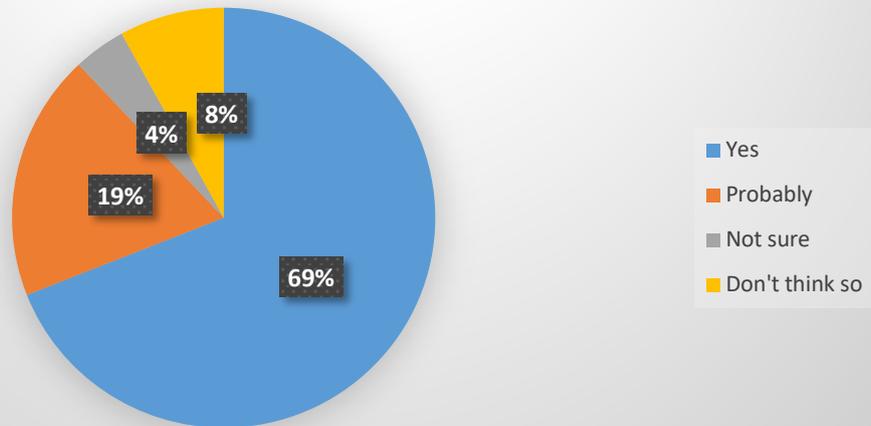
Playfair goes on to say that we need knowledge to build skills and we need skills to live our lives. Both knowledge and skill inform each other, and all education (further, higher or otherwise) relies on gaining knowledge **and** skills. In recognising that a liberal arts curriculum brings together knowledge and skill, students who engaged with the programme felt that they had developed 'soft' skills for employability during their first year at Richmond. These included: critical thinking skills, self-awareness, communication skills, problem solving and team work. Further comments indicated the positives of a close faculty/student relationship and the benefits of learning to be flexible and adaptable. Overall, students felt positively toward their studies and the prospects of their newly honed skills being valuable and useful later within their degree course and beyond. Students involved in this study generally felt they had the flexibility to be creative and innovative while working to hone practical, transferrable skills in preparation for employment.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/06/the-practical-and-the-theoretical/>.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.tes.com/news/tes-fe-podcast-why-pit-knowledge-against-skills>

## Do you think these skills will help you later in your course/life?



### How does student engagement relate to student success if at all?

The University's values also include the notion of creating a 'culture of responsibility' whereby students 'seek to make a positive contribution' to their communities. This commitment to good citizenship is an underlying theme within liberal arts education and demands an agreement from the students to engage themselves in the programme and the requirement of the University to offer an interesting, meaningful academic programme to its students. Students who invested themselves in the First-Year programme at Richmond University, commented that they felt personally transformed and part of a unique experience.

*I think if you commit to them (the courses) you can change the way you think and really appreciate what you have more. It's like seeing things from a 360 degree view instead of just one angle.' (Student 1)*

*I think there's no question that the liberal arts curriculum is Richmond's USP [unique selling point] (Student 2)*

The idea of a different kind of degree programme altogether may not appeal to everyone on a practical level and this has been a cause for concern with four-year liberal arts degrees, particularly in the UK. (Peachey, 2016) Weighing up the practicalities of a streamlined, three-year single honours degree or a more professionalised US degree with imbedded work experience against the esoteric notions of transferrable skills and career preparation within a 4-year curriculum sprinkled with elective modules can cause doubt and concern, so it comes as no surprise that students' perceptions of the use and value of

the liberal arts curriculum is inconsistent. One of the students in the focus group who appeared very committed to her course commented:

*...there was a lot of variety (within the programme)...which is good...but some of the classes seemed a bit directionless. I wondered why we were doing the things we were doing...overall I think they (the classes) were useful, but when I was in them, it didn't always feel that way. (Student 1)*

The negative comments about the course which include feelings of irrelevance, time-wasting and pointlessness reflect the disconnection between the aims of the programme and the students' agreement to engage positively with it. One respondent to the course evaluation likened her academic experience to that of a child:

*I have been treated like a child—I have no academic independence; I have to take subjects I have no interest in*

Interestingly, in attempting to afford students more choice of the modules they can take within a broad course of study, the result is that some students feel constrained by these options instead of open to opportunities. Barry Schwartz in his book, The Paradox of Choice (2004), describes this conundrum as the struggle between 'freedom to' (a choice of many opportunities) and 'freedom from' (the constraints or limitations of choice). The difficulty is, he explains, that with a spectrum of many choices, the lack of constraints can make choice seem frustrating, daunting and potentially even overwhelming. Making the wrong choice or a choice that may have been less positive than another can mean regret which leads to dissatisfaction. In this case, the students have chosen to study at a liberal arts university with requirements to take modules external to their major course of study, but regret being required to take these modules because they believe they are peripheral to their real interests. Louis Menard in his 2010 book, The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University, defines general education as just the opposite.

*'...general education is where colleges connect what professors do with who their students are and what they will become after they graduate—where colleges actually think about the outcome of the experience they provide. General education is, historically, the public face of liberal education.'*(31-32)

Students who engaged with the liberal arts offering in this study in large part reporting feeling fulfilled and successful in the pursuit of their university degree. They also felt generally optimistic about what the future may hold.

**What practical measurable skills do students develop in their first year and what value is attributed to these skills?**

In 'preparing students for life' are universities becoming both trainers and educators and is this role tenable? Engaging students in the practicalities of skills-based learning can have positive outcomes if students perceive this training to be valuable to their future endeavours. Those students who successfully integrated into the liberal arts programme at Richmond and engaged with it both physically and psychologically indicated that they found value in the practical skill-building aspects of the programme ranking communication skills, self-reflection and the ability to work with others as key outcomes of their first year of study. These skills in addition to resilience, problem-solving and flexibility/adaptability all rank highly on employers' requirements for graduate positions. (AGCAS, 2018)

The question remains: can universities both successfully train a work force and educate a population? How can an institution 'prepare' its students for life in an age when change is everywhere and inevitable? In the 2003 white paper, the Future of Higher Education, the UK Department for Education & Skills set out to build a series of partnerships to manage what they described as 'exchanging and delivering knowledge and skill'—something they underlined as of key importance to continued progress and innovation in the UK. Instead of seeing business and education as separate entities, the white paper described them as 'interdependent'.

'The relationship between knowledge transfer and the development of technical skills in the workforce is one of interdependence. The development of new skills can also lead to a more intelligent demand for knowledge transfer and stimulate the further development of the knowledge pool.'(37)<sup>32</sup>

Out of the white paper, the Higher Education Innovation Fund was created with £80 million of funding in the first year and more to follow. Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) also popped up as did the London Higher Education Consortium (LHEC) which brought together businesses and universities to discuss how to best prepare graduates for industry jobs. Further conversations about a 'skills strategy', the 'skills economy' and contributions to the 'skills sector' led conversations on higher education and its remit for a number of years. (Medhat, 2003; Ansell, 2016; Playfair, 2019)

Changes to tuition costs and government funding have introduced huge changes in the UK in the last ten years, but much of this had its start with the 1997 Dearing Report on Higher Education. The Dearing Report set out to review higher education in the UK through the lens of the needs of students and their communities. The report initiated conversations about the skills shortage and the knowledge economy whereby the ideas of vocation and

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<sup>32</sup> <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2003-white-paper-higher-ed.pdf>

technical training versus theoretical and knowledge-based education merged into a single offering.

‘We see the historic boundaries between vocation and academic education as breaking down; with increasingly active partnerships between higher education institutions and the worlds of industry, commerce and public service.’ (Dearing 1997)

In considering the needs of the community, education can and does invest in the individual in order to give back to the wider community. (Moretti, 2004, Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2013<sup>33</sup>, UUK, 2011<sup>34</sup>) Students involved in this study who engaged with the programme found that they gained skills in the areas of self-reflection, personal development, the ability to work with others and general self-management. They attributed some value to the outcomes, but they did not see an exclusive connection between their academic course and the development of these skills.

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/254101/bis-13-1268-benefits-of-higher-education-participation-the-quadrants.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/254101/bis-13-1268-benefits-of-higher-education-participation-the-quadrants.pdf)

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2011/degrees-of-value.pdf>

## **Chapter 8: Implications for Practice & Policy**

The study of liberal arts or general studies claims to have value in its practicalities if the associations with these practicalities are made early, clearly and are offered as part of both an academic and social community.

‘In a knowledge economy, the traditional dichotomy between the liberal arts, which focus on knowing and have their ends in themselves, and the practical arts, which focus on action and utility, is not absolute.’(Roche, 2010: 31)

Attributing value or worth to portions or even all of an academic experience is unreliable at best. Questions remain: is there value in being a good communicator which is developed through academic study? Is there value in being able to recognise patterns, to understand relationships and to think critically about outcomes and solutions as they might affect others? A liberal arts education claims to teach these practical and employable skills, but it appears that students only gain maximum benefit if they engage fully in the experience. With engagement comes further self-reflection and perhaps even the opportunity for transformative learning. (Barkley, 2010) In taking part in teaching and learning in higher education, liberal arts students find themselves in the middle of a debate that highlights higher education’s *raison d’être*: do universities exist to educate young people in preparation for a life of good citizenship or do they exist to prepare young people for careers that are challenging and positively impactful to the local and wider community? At the root of it, are these two purposes really all that different?

In following the media debate of the value of liberal arts, the outcomes of pursuing liberal arts study in higher education appear to have three main areas of potential impact:

1. The pursuit of both skills AND knowledge, not one or the other
2. Citizenship training for local and global change
3. The development of positive attitudes and abilities in support of life-long learning

These three areas are of key significance to Richmond University’s mission, vision and values and hold a place of importance in the University’s curriculum and the design of its student experience, but are these ideals clear to students? How are they articulated from inside the classroom? Do students see them as important? meaningful? relevant?

### **Skills vs Knowledge**

At the start of this study, students were asked to consider the skills they might engage in learning alongside their first-year academic modules. In questioning the potential practical outcomes of the course, students were, perhaps unwittingly, already thinking about how

pursuing knowledge and learning skills go hand in hand. Those who engaged with the offering felt that they had made personal gains in skill development throughout the year. Those who did not engage or did not identify with the practical aspects of the course felt that the programme lacked utility and was simply 'a waste of time'. Interestingly in a time when global employers bemoan the lack of skill within industry (QS, 2018), students who are actively offered options to learn skills that will potentially make them more employable, often see these offerings as unnecessary and even redundant.

In AGCAS' 2018 publication '*What do Graduates Do?*', employers ranked the five most important 'soft' skills required for successful employment: problem solving, team work, communication, adaptability and interpersonal skills. Employers who were surveyed felt that with these skills, newly employed graduates can contribute successfully in many different industries and can learn new 'hard' skills while being productively employed. In a 2012 survey<sup>35</sup> hosted by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA, over 90% of the thousands of US university students surveyed responded that they had chosen to work toward an undergraduate degree because they wanted to qualify for a better job which might not be offered to them without a degree and/ or they aimed to make more money with their completed undergraduate degree. The value of an undergraduate degree for many US students in particular still rests in the presumption that it adds value in a competitive employment market and offers a foundation for a life of higher earning potential. (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002) This attitude often paves the way for the uncomfortable, but perhaps inevitable, relationship of student as consumer versus student as investor which, of course, also relates to levels of engagement within a course. When engaged with an activity that a student finds relevant or useful, the student is far more likely to see the value of the activity and consider himself to be a contributor or co-creator rather than a user or consumer. (Guilbault, 2016)

With higher tuition costs, it seems inevitable that students will focus their attention on what they consider 'value for money' but with engagement as a driving force, seeing students' individual contributions as a means of investing in their own education is perhaps a more optimistic outcome. Overwhelmingly, the research surrounding why students choose higher education is about belief of future financial gain and career status. (Esson & Ertl 2016, Tomlinson 2008, Warmington 2003, Delucchi & Korgen 2002) A recent study at University of Toronto (2019) highlighted this duality of students feeling engaged, optimistic

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<sup>35</sup> <http://www.schoolinfosystem.org/pdf/2013/01/TheAmericanFreshman2012.pdf>

and influential in the outcomes of their educational experience versus disengaged, pessimistic and dystopic about the ultimate value of the degree they were working toward. In conversations about the financial investment and sacrifice of higher education, 'Joshua' (the amalgamized student sample) felt pessimistic about the money he was spending on his course, but when engaged in meaningful activities while on his course, he felt positively about the investment he was making. (Rahman et al, 2019)

Similar to Joshua's experience, higher levels of engagement in purposeful activities that relate to the student's academic course generally mean more individual autonomy, positive feelings of accomplishment and fewer negative feelings about the ultimate value (financial or otherwise) of the degree programme. In Coates' 2005 study of student engagement, he cited six areas that relate to positive notions of student involvement that channel the role of student investor instead of the role of student consumer. These include: academic challenge, active learning opportunities, student/staff interactions, enriching educational experiences, a supportive/inclusive learning environment and opportunities for work-related learning. With students actively participating and engaging in academic and co-curricular pursuits, the joint proposition of a great student experience and engagement within it requires both skill and knowledge acquisition. This ultimately can lead to personal and professional fulfilment. Students' responses to the initial questions about why they chose liberal arts study drew on the notion of being creative, different or even innovative in the way that they approached learning. Further, those who engaged with the University's offer in this study, stated that they felt they had gained useful skills and that the liberal arts core had positively enhanced their learning experience. Seeing the workplace as both vocational and professional means seeing progress as inclusive not divided. In putting an end to the debate between training for a vocation versus educating for a future, liberal arts study aims to fuse together the theoretical and practical so that students can see the value in learning new things and the products of their education in skill development and progression.

'Higher education can advance the economy by increasing the labour force skills and lifting the store of knowledge. Perhaps most importantly, higher education has the ability to transmit a common culture and common standard of citizenship.'  
(Trowler, 2018)

In 2018, 1.5 million children in the UK took A-level exams (Department for Education, 2018)<sup>36</sup> in the hopes of qualifying for university entry and at the same time, 3.8 million people took vocational qualifications to enter or progress within the work force. It seems there is still a hierarchy of people's perceptions of the value of higher learning, but in the practicalities of fuelling a workforce, there seems very little debate: the global economy needs both thinkers and doers and shoving people into one or the other category does nothing to advance higher education. (Playfair, 2019)

### **Citizenship training**

A core proposed outcome of the earliest delivery of liberal arts style courses was to train 'good' citizens and encourage active involvement in the local and wider community. In student terms, this idea is equivalent to the notion of 'making a difference' or contributing productively to the global economy and it is an idea that rings true with Richmond University's mission, vision and values and was a key feature of engagement for some of the students who participated in this study. Citizenship training has its roots in ancient Greece where young men were educated to build key core capacities that would allow them to speak publicly and debate on issues of public interest as a means of building a functioning democratic society. It was thought that with these capabilities, free men could live a comfortable, satisfying life assured that their contributions were vital to the evolving society in which they lived. In 1998 Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen expanded on the idea of citizenship by introducing basic capabilities required to live a fulfilling life. These capabilities combined both the necessities of shelter, good health and freedom from basic oppression with access to education, free thought and control over each individual's decision-making. Nussbaum argues that gaining these capabilities requires access to knowledge and to skills-based growth that allow people to communicate with others, think critically about important ideas and concepts, attempt to solve problems that are pressing and work with others to seek change.

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 1998)<sup>37</sup> defines citizenship education through 3 main components. UNESCO aims to:

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/772074/2018\\_provisional\\_A\\_level\\_and\\_other16-18\\_results\\_in\\_England\\_-\\_update.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/772074/2018_provisional_A_level_and_other16-18_results_in_England_-_update.pdf)

<sup>37</sup> [http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme\\_b/interact/mod07task03/appendix.htm](http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_b/interact/mod07task03/appendix.htm)

1. Educate people in citizenship and human rights through an understanding of the principles and institutions which govern a state or nation
2. Encourage others to learn to exercise their judgement and critical facilities
3. Support people in acquiring a sense of individual and community responsibility

The citizenship agenda links institutional aspirations to student aspirations in motivating institutions to create a culture where students are valued, included and prepared to engage in their course and students feel inspired, challenged and motivated to contribute. (Friedman, 2018; Newell & Davis, 1988; Zgaga, 2009) It is difficult to be a consumer while training to be a citizen. The values of consumer behaviour and good citizenship do not mesh. In investing in the social capital to create global citizens (i.e. actively teaching enhanced communication skills, critical thinking, team work and problem solving), universities aim to create communities of learning where students feel supported, have shared values and contribute actively by engaging with the university's offer. Universities will further claim that the education of global citizens is a commitment to their local and wider community to offer a public good.

The foundation of a broad-based form of higher education anchored in civic engagement is the pivot for many students to begin to ask questions about their own value, future aspirations and position within the world and within the community structure in which they are living. Saenz and Barrera's (2007) study of US students' reasons for taking part in higher education showed a clear trend of a 'value for money' proposition before entry to a switch in the importance of 'personal development nearer the end of the course.'

'...whereas a significantly greater percentage of students were more interested in financial gain than meaningful philosophy of life at the beginning of college, by the time of graduation the numbers had converged with regard to these two life objectives.' (14-15)

Indeed, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) recorded the same findings—that students discovered the intrinsic value in liberal arts study only after the time and energy they spent engaging fully with it and through purposeful activities that linked active engagement with coursework. In a longitudinal study conducted for Volume 2: How College Affects Students, findings showed an indirect correlation between college education and a general positive quality of life including 'enhancement of economic affluence, sense of control over one's life, networks of social support, and perceived health status.'(566) Universities searching for their global impact and public good point to their degrees and the outcomes of graduate contributions and successes.

## Life Long Learning

The idea and the value associated with the concept of life-long learning have their roots in ancient writings. Indeed, ancient Greek education revolved around the idea that all free men should be schooled to contribute to their communities by becoming skilled at debating topics of public interest and by becoming prepared to make decisions that positively affect the daily lives of their societies. These contributions were meant to be continuous throughout one's life and in developing the skill and positive attitudes toward individual enquiry and the energy and interest in continued development these engaged citizens would build a positive, safe and vibrant community. The concept of life-long learning is still an important tenant of a modern liberal arts education. (Coates, 2005; Nussbaum, 2010; Davis, 2017) Preparing graduates for positions of service within their community by equipping them with the necessary skills for advancement and by developing their sense of curiosity for continued engagement will create active, involved citizens. Engagement and active learning are key concepts in the delivery of a liberal arts curriculum, but sustaining the continued drive to learn, grow and understand new ways of thinking have become perhaps even more important than any other concept to liberal arts education in measuring its claims to be practical. (Barkley, 2010)

Coombs (1982) claims that education in general (higher education as well as school-based learning) has been in the midst of a crisis since the 1960s. The specific challenges he has observed are:

- a new growing population of potential learners (more now than ever before)
- new and growing concerns about how to finance and resource education
- growing concerns about learners having fair access to education
- a growing need for education to have a relation to everyday life and/or some 'practicality'
- a need to have more different and flexible learning and teaching strategies that relate to the challenges of everyday life (p 143)

The crisis that Coombs describes has much to do with changes in demographics of university students coupled with the concerns of costs and the value for money proposition that a university degree brings with it. This value students are weighing up is rooted in the obvious outcomes of potential financial gain and professional status post-graduation, but also in the students' participation in an engaging, fulfilling student experience that reaches beyond their university years to a life of enquiry and personal development. The dilemma of how to best manage the 'value for money' proposition associated with higher education particularly with liberal arts courses, has settled most recently in discussions of the

'usefulness' of its offerings: Is there value in the practicalities of citizenship and lifelong learning within liberal arts study or is it in the intrinsic value of 'education for education's sake' which can be a very esoteric concept and often difficult to measure in any tangible form? Similar to the argument of skill over knowledge or indeed knowledge over skill, liberal arts' practicalities as they are represented in the ability to promote life-long learning can often get lost in the public's perception of whether continued and sustained learning is a by-product of higher education or rather rooted more firmly in an individual's character. The evidence from my research appears to indicate that value for money initiatives including practical, transferrable skill development and connections to real-life applications of education are indeed important to students opting to study at Richmond. The investment of students is not simply in the experience itself but also in the outcomes of the experience. Students in this study cited feelings of affiliation with the mission, vision and values of the institution and generally agreed that the skills they were meant to be learning would help them later in their studies and potentially beyond.

[The] process of acquisition of the skills and abilities, attitudes, values and self-image required for lifelong learning involved what we understand by the term 'learning to learn'. (Niece & Murray 1997, 245)

Neuroscientists have termed this process of learning to learn a process of developing 'metacognitive skills' or, in simple terms, a process of thinking about how we think. (Fleming & Frith, 2014; Nieimi, 2009) Metacognitive training involves the skills of self-regulation, the ability to consider strategies for learning new ideas or skills and the ability to monitor the effectiveness of these strategies and adjust them as necessary. A liberal arts curriculum arguably builds a foundation by which students can develop their metacognitive abilities by involving them in different types of learning from classroom lectures to experiential activities and by building an inclusive social environment in which ideas are discussed, debated and learning is negotiated together.

John Mezirow (1990) termed his type of learning 'transformative' in that it has the power to entirely change the way a person views the world by distancing them from their own assumptions and opening their minds to alternative ways of thinking. This can be uncomfortable and disorienting, but the skills advanced by able metacognitive thinkers are valuable and transferrable to any setting and, unsurprisingly the same outcomes espoused by the liberal arts curriculum. A single degree should therefore offer the foundation for further enquiry and prepare graduates for a life of learning, but how does a liberal arts degree emulate these values, skills and attitudes? What does life-long learning need to

achieve in preparation for continued and sustained education? Both neuroscientists and researchers interested in the pedagogy of teaching believe that students of any age can be taught successfully to learn. This involves training or (in the case of adults) retraining our brains to prepare for new ideas and concepts so that we can integrate them into our repertoire.

Learning does not happen in isolation, however, it is a social practice. Taylor & Lamoureaux (2008) state 'current trends in neuroscience are unveiling more evidence that human brains need social interaction to promote neural plasticity'. This means that creating a positive environment where students feel included and supported is essential. Being a member of a learning community also means taking part in negotiating meaning with others and expanding one's ideas as a result.

When thinking with a variety of perspectives becomes the default mode, more choices present themselves freeing the thinker from old pathways. (Davis, 2017, 261)

Learning within a social construct where community members' perspectives are discussed in an attempt to make sense of a problem or dilemma offers an opportunity for students to gain perspective and allows for differing opinions and ideas whereby consensus may never be reached. Situations like these mirror real-life issues and therefore support the training of skills surrounding communication, negotiation and problem solving.

The practice of 'learning to learn' is an essential part of this negotiation and a key concept in promoting sustainable continued personal and professional development. Studies that took place in the 1980s by Bransford, Sherwood & Vye (1986) and others suggested that students who develop their metacognitive skills are better critical thinkers, problem solvers and decision makers. These studies consider 'deep' strategies for learning that engage students in the subject and draw on practical learning including associations to previous activities as well as practical outlets in the form of experiential learning. Beyond building practical skills, further research by Hofer & Yu (2003) found that well-developed metacognitive skills can also increase an individual's motivation to learn, an essential characteristic of life-long learners.

Cropley (2000) measured the value of life-long learning by considering its potential for promoting equality of educational opportunity; its possible role in democratising education and its potential contribution to the achievement of higher levels of self-actualisation. All in all, developing opportunities for students to take part in a life of learning has the potential

to entirely change the way education is delivered, consumed and perceived globally. Advancing life-long learning requires a willingness to continue taking part in the activity of learning and the necessity to be curious and questioning, but perhaps most importantly, it requires a person to develop the skills, values and attitudes that support further enquiry. As changes happen to us as individuals and all around us in our communities, McClusky (1974) rightly points out 'continuous change requires continuous learning'. (101) A liberal arts education is primed to offer skill-related training that prepares students for a plethora of opportunities for the future, but it is often masked by the perception that it is an extra or an add-on to the main course of study or, as some of the students in this study surmised 'a waste of time'. Gelb (1998) in discussing traits from one of the most innovative and creative thinkers of our time, Leonardo Da Vinci, cited Da Vinci's guiding practice was knowing his own goals and aspirations for which he worked to find ways to make them a part of his life—in thinking creatively, learning continuously and ceaselessly evolving as a life-long learner.

## **Chapter 9: Recommendations for Programme Adjustments & Theories of Student Success**

Offering a challenging, stimulating and engaging programme of study to a diverse group of students is no easy task and as this study has highlighted some areas of student disenchantment or disengagement with liberal arts study, so has it also highlighted some real student commitment to it. Students within this study who felt they had taken on new knowledge, developed skills and completed their first year of university as engaged, self-reliant learners are the stories of student success. Those who felt disengaged, uninterested and disenchanted by the programme departed as a group, unsuccessful and annoyed by what they considered a wholly unfulfilling student experience. These students' comments underline three areas in which the University should consider changes for the first-year programme moving forward.

These are:

1. To better understand the student's role at the University
2. To better articulate the University's commitment to the student and his/her experience and
3. To emphasize and promote the degree programme's practical results and how these translate to valuable, life-long outcomes.

### **The Student's Role**

We have discussed the common perception of student as consumer and how this model can be divisive, both for the University, but also for the student. As a consumer, the focus is on using products and services and using them to their fullest—in student terms this means getting your money's worth. Consumption is generally not about investment or longer-term gains. In the same way student consumerism operates to serve only short-term goals not the longer-term investment a liberal arts education demands. (Molesworth et al, 2011) With a constant focus on the here and now and consumerist ideals, the need for immediate service will always take precedent. The students in this study who indicated frustration with their first-year programme, felt it was a waste of time, gained them nothing, limited their independence and set them back in their studies. Students questioned why they should engage with programmes that offered little to no relevance to them.

*'...it's a completely useless waste of time and energy...'*

*'A lot needs to chan[g]e about Richmond as it is not in any way suited to British students who have had a sense of independence with choosing subjects at a-levels and gcse and are now demanded to choose subjects I have NO interest in.'*

Molesworth and Nixon term this a culture of 'having' instead of 'being' whereby education becomes a product to be purchased instead of a programme with which to engage. 'The current HE market discourse promotes a mode of existence where students seek to 'have a degree' rather than 'be learners'' (2011, p 40). This relationship promotes distance and disengagement between the university and the student and inevitably leads to discontent when the 'buyer' feels his/her needs are not being met.

However, in an environment where two-way engagement (engagement of the university and engagement of the student) is encouraged, expected and rewarded, consumers can become investors or even co-creators in their own educational experience by actively participating in the classroom and outside of it, by taking on roles of responsibility and by becoming self-reliant, self-directed learners. The students who participated in the focus group highlighted the discord between those making the choice to engage and take part actively versus those who did very little. Similar comments were received in the final anonymised survey.

*'There are a lot of programmes designed to help during your first year at Richmond, but the level of success of these is limited to the participation of the students. There needs to be a change in the way such programmes [co-curricular and extra-curricular] are presented to ensure engagement.'*

In shifting the role of student as consumer or user to student as active co-creator or investor, the likelihood of engagement and the expectation of transformative learning is much higher which in turn means more opportunity to gain knowledge, skill and a better student experience. (Kuh, 1999) How can we encourage students to take on these roles which can be perceived as difficult and time consuming in an age when the public is searching for immediate gratification and cost benefit? Perhaps this argument is best made by using the initial perceptions of the students who took part in this study. Liberal arts study is 'unique' and 'different'. It requires a personal investment and a commitment. With that commitment comes a number of potential benefits, but the benefits are only reaped by those who engage with it wholeheartedly and persist.

*'It is the critical relationships that students develop [through engagement] with knowledge that makes a University degree a higher form of education.'* (Ashwin & McVitty, 2015, 343)

## **The University's Commitment**

Although the student role is a vital part of the educational offering, the University's commitment is equally as important, perhaps even more so, in attracting and retaining the right students who will ultimately persist, progress and successfully complete their courses. The University's commitment to provide tools, resources, services and programmes to teach students is one part of the agreement, but an engaging university offer should also invest in understanding its students' motivations and aspirations for the future. With an understanding of what students hope to achieve, the offerings can serve to motivate and engage students and can also offer practical outlets for students to develop knowledge and skill. Richmond University's commitment to students is:

'to educate and inform future generations by providing them with the knowledge and support to think critically, the freedom to challenge assumptions and the skills to work with others.' (2019)<sup>38</sup>

Critical thinking was one of the areas discussed with students within this study as a potential outcome of the first year programme and although some students felt they had made personal gains in this area, it was unclear if the first year programme was a contributing factor to this progress or if the students felt these gains were attributed to other factors of their own construction. Nevertheless, opportunities to see things from different viewpoints and challenge internalised presupposed ideas gave opportunity for the advancement of higher thinking skills. The freedom to challenge assumptions was an area that warranted discussion in the focus group and also appeared in the anonymised surveys whereby students commented on the value of a diverse student population and the positive community aspects of the programme. 'Freedom' in this sense notes again the encouragement to explore, consider different perspectives and consult and negotiate with others. One student commented that he came to London to look at things 'from a different angle' and this programme allowed him the freedom to do this. Amongst all of the skills that appeared in the surveys for first year students, team work (or the skills required to work with others) received high marks. Working within a group as part of the first-year programme was a purposeful activity built into the curriculum which students recognised as useful and important.

'The Liberal Arts education sets Richmond apart from other UK universities and I believe it positively enhances my learning.'

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.richmond.ac.uk/about-richmond/mission-statement/>

Those students who failed to engage with the first-year programme did not identify with the University's commitment to its students. They felt that the offerings of the programme did not deliver on the University's promises. In reviewing the students' engagement activities, however, the programmes and services in which the majority of students took part were either those required for the module as part of the assessment criteria or those that related to a personal interest (like a student-run club or society). Other parts of the programme, student representation or student employment, for example, had a very low uptake, perhaps because the overt connections to the utility of these activities (negotiation, flexibility, managing conflict) were not discussed or promoted effectively enough.

In attempting to make the seemingly impractical form of education practical, Charles Davis (2017) discusses liberal arts in his article 'The Practicality of an Impractical Education'. Davis suggests that the value of liberal arts is to enable students to 'think outside the box'—to be creative, to challenge assumptions and to think critically.

If the end of higher education becomes preparation applicable to a vocation, training in various established boxes, protocols and procedures will become standard. But if the goal is broader, to prepare those who design the boxes or if the employment preparation [...is] a broad experience with thinking and communicating plus a literacy of interpretation derived from an education in the Liberal Arts and Humanities is very practical. (267)

### **Practical Outcomes**

The goal of a liberal arts education has long been to educate citizens of the world and create life-long learners who will contribute positively to their communities. No one would argue that these outcomes are unworthy or insignificant. They are, however, vague in their generality and in the means by which they are meant to be delivered. Critics of liberal arts study over the last several years have argued that these goals are impractical, and at best, difficult to evaluate. (Hopkins, 2014, Reich, 2014, Strauss, 2019, Waechter, 2016) They also send an elitist message to the public that universities offering these degrees are searching for students who care little about a practical, purposeful degree and more about learning for its own sake—which is admirable, but not affordable in everyone's mind. These viewpoints have created a false dichotomy between the practicalities of a single honours degree or a more professionalised degree in their specificity and connections to industry and the impracticalities of a generalised degree without clear links to a specific career route. This study has uncovered, however, that there are practicalities hidden in the lofty goals of good citizenship and lifelong learning and these are found in the development of

useful skills like problem solving and adaptability, the development of self-regulated learning abilities and in the attitudes, beliefs and values associated with motivated, active engaged learners. Interestingly, when employers are questioned about the skills required for work in industry, they invariably recount the transferrable skills taught purposefully within a liberal arts degree, but more tangentially in other degree courses.<sup>39</sup> Students who have discovered and honed these practical skills feel their university experience has been fulfilling and rewarding, but those who don't see or don't identify these skills as being important or practical feel that their experience is not useful or as one student commented, 'infantile'.

Liberal arts education claims to prepare graduates for careers of the future whereby the required skill for a specific industry (or perhaps even the industry itself) is, as of yet, unknown. The use of general skills is, of course, that they are transferrable to a number of different fields and careers, but is this enough? The uncertainty of what the future holds is worrying. Will machine learning make some careers obsolete? Will graduates need to have more technical skills to compete in a competitive job market? Will offices of the future exist only virtually and what does this mean for jobs that involve human contact? Managing the uncertainty of the future with all of the ambiguous messages this brings along with it is another important goal of a liberal arts education. In a world of constant change, being able to manage and tolerate ambiguity and work within an environment of uncertainty calls for flexible, adaptable, resourceful people and those eager to take on a challenge. Amongst other skills, these may be the most important in our current age.

There are practicalities in a liberal arts education that remain unseen (or perhaps ignored) by many, but if these are purposefully taught and their impact is discussed and negotiated with students, perhaps more students will actively engage with them and benefit from them.

'I personally believe the extra-curricular activities and liberal arts education make Richmond alumni much better suited to employment than many of the Russell group universities in the UK.'

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<sup>39</sup> More about graduate skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century <https://www.qaa.ac.uk/scotland/focus-on/graduate-skills>

## Chapter 10: Student Retention

*'[Student] departures may serve as a barometer of the social and intellectual health of college life' (Tinto, 1987, 5)*

In the earlier part of this study, I discussed reasons why students had made the choice to attend a liberal arts programme and ultimately why they engaged (or did not) with the academic and co-curricular parts of the offering. Students who decided to continue their course after the first year claimed positive personal outcomes and achievements, but what about those who departed? Discounting them as disengaged and uninterested would be a simple outcome, but the picture of the student experience would be incomplete without also considering departing students' experiences and their reasons for leaving.

Theories of student departures in higher education began to take shape, mainly in America, about 50 years ago. They began with the works of Spady (1970) and Tinto (1987). Spady theorised that students make the choice to leave higher education because of two main factors: a poor academic experience and/or insufficient friendships and social support. Tinto's theory, although very similar to Spady's, focused more on students' involvement, investment and engagement with their programme than on the external factors which Spady described although they are, of course, entwined. Later, in 1980, Bean introduced a theory of student attrition in which he likened the departure of a student from a course to the departure of a worker from employment. Bean suggested that workers leave employment because of their dissatisfaction with pay, the working environment and the opportunities afforded to them as employees while students leave their courses because of their dissatisfaction with their academic progress, the quality of the institution as a whole and their concerns about the practical value of their course. Bean's theory initiated some early discussions on value for money in higher education and how the perceptions and attitudes of students, particularly early on, are important to their decision to persist and complete their courses or depart.

Pascarella and Terenzini (1985) followed Bean with a theory of retention that related to the importance of building an intellectual community which includes informal contact between students and faculty within a supportive, nurturing environment. Pascarella theorised that building the right relationships between faculty and students can boost retention and prevent departures. In 1984, Astin presented a retention theory based on student involvement which, alongside Tinto's theory has been the basis for much of the research on student retention over the last three decades. Both Astin and Tinto believe that student

involvement and engagement, physical and psychological, builds a personal investment in the course and ultimately results in persistence. Later models included Bean and Metzner (1985) and Cabrera, Nora and Casteñada (1993) who focused more on external factors relating to the student's decision to attend a course of higher education and the support and encouragement the student had available throughout the course. The later theories also considered students' financial attitudes towards higher education in general, their commitment to pursue their goal of earning a degree, their integration (both academic and social) as well as their academic performance.

The students departing their academic course as part of this study cited three main reasons as their motivation for withdrawal. These were: concerns about value for money, worries that the academic reputation of the university was not at a level that would help them later in life and concerns about the quality of academic advising. Free text comments were similar in content. These indicated that the University was the wrong fit for the student and that the student felt there were poor quality services and programmes to support them. They also reiterated that they felt the experience itself did not represent value for money.

### **Value for Money**

As the offer of higher education in the UK has changed, particularly over the past 10 years, it is not uncommon to hear complaints about value for money in relationship to the outcomes of the investment in tuition and other university costs associated with attending the course of a student's choice. Following the 2012 Browne Review (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2011)<sup>40</sup> of higher education and the increase in tuition fees for all home students, the relationship between the university and the student in the UK fundamentally changed forever. As a result, '...students increasingly want to know where their money is going, the quality of the product they will receive and what they should expect in return.' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, 28) Following the 2018 Parliamentary Review, the Office for Students was set up as a means of protecting the students' interests and serving as a 'market regulator' to ensure value for money in higher education. Value, however, is a complicated concept and one with different meanings to different people. Is it a promise of what's to come or is it an offer of an experience here and now that is engaging and transformational?

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/422565/bis-10-1208-securing-sustainable-higher-education-browne-report.pdf)

Kotler et al (2010) claim there are three ways to deliver value to customers. These are: 1. Charge a lower price than the market average 2. Help the customer reduce their costs 3. Add benefits that make the offer more attractive. Because of external factors and operational constraints, tuition costs are not easily adjusted, but scholarships and bursaries are an important part of the admissions process at some universities (and Richmond is one of these). The offer of financial support is often a key factor in the student's agreement to attend the University and can ultimately be the deciding factor for students in choosing one institution over another. Beyond monetary costs, however, is the idea that added benefits can mean real value. Value for money in higher education is often measured in the minds of students by historical data related to past teaching assessments, the university's research performance and graduate employability. (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009). Indeed, graduates entering the workforce with a higher education degree as opposed to a secondary-level education in the UK can expect to earn 20-25% more income initially and have a higher level of average earnings throughout their lifetimes with a lower risk of unemployment. (UUK, 2018) In addition, higher education graduates generally have higher levels of trust in public policy making and are more involved in civic activities and are more politically aware (HEPI, 2017)<sup>41</sup>. Maringe and Gibb term this idea 'valued added' which '[...lies in the institutions' ability to add value to the future income or life chance of the student.' Those choosing to study a higher education degree are in general agreement that there are basic expected outcomes of a first degree and these can be seen both in the monetary results of their work and in associated positive feelings of engagement with their community. It is this data that may form the student's initial decision to join a specific institution, but what measures of value for money are students assessing when they choose to leave their course having attended only a portion of it?

The delivery of a value for money experience—particularly in education—is a concept that straddles content and delivery. As in earlier discussions of curriculum and pedagogy, the value students are seeing (or not seeing) in liberal arts is likely a bi-product of both what is being taught and how it is being delivered. It seems that a decision to leave mid-course is more about a disconnection between the offer and the reality of the course than it is about the longer-term potential outcomes after graduation or perhaps an inability or unwillingness to suspend disbelief for a future potential outcome.

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<sup>41</sup> <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2017/06/07/4270/>

Richmond's degree programmes, and namely its first-year modules, aim to deliver an engaging academic experience alongside practical skill development that prepare the student for future academic study within the course. Richmond's view is that the first-year modules set the tone for the remainder of the degree programme, so disengagement from these essential modules ultimately means disengagement from the degree programme. If we return to Tinto's Theory of Student Involvement, an argument can be made that those students who chose to withdraw and leave the course were those who did not feel they had membership within the community and held only a tenuous relationship to their course offering. Comments about the first-year modules that related to its poor value included '[it was] a waste of time', 'not a valuable system' and 'did not provide the right skills for employment'. In weighing up value for money the students choosing to depart were concerned not only with future employment potential, but also with the here and now of the time and energy required to engage with a module that they believed was not useful or even unnecessary.

Bok (2013) argues that being able to articulate the reasons behind modules or even degree programmes and their outcomes has been a challenge, particularly for US institutions, because they choose to hide behind the lofty goals of global citizenship and active learning instead of explaining the more practical and measurable outcomes of a degree. He states 'Under these circumstances [our current climate of value for money], it is not enough to utter broad generalizations about the benefits of a well-rounded undergraduate education. College officials need to give a convincing account of what they hope students will gain from their four years and how the current course requirements will help them achieve these ends.' (2013, 182)

The students who remained unconvinced of the value of their first year at Richmond perhaps did not feel convinced that the efforts they put in (or the efforts they were meant to put in) paid off. Although there are clear links between the students' classroom experiences and their willingness to engage with academic programmes and in turn see the value of their engagement, there is little research to inform how this engagement links to persistence and retention. Braxton (2000) states '...there is a rich line of inquiry into the linkage between learning and persistence that has yet to be pursued. We need to invest our time and energies into a full exploration of the complex ways in which the experience of the classroom comes to shape student learning and persistence.' (p.23)

### **University reputation**

The reputation of a university is often referred to as a 'rainbow concept' (Maringe & Gibbs, 2009) by marketing professionals because it has so many shades of meaning that account for external and internal relationships. It is not simply described as a single idea. It is much more complex. An external reputation can be a deciding factor in prestigious partnerships or even in research and funding. With a positive reputation, programmes and services could be viewed with an optimistic and willing attitude, but with a negative reputation, each element of a programme is measured, evaluated and inspected for worth. Liberal arts programmes as a whole have been scrutinised out of concern for their value-for-money offer in the marketplace. How can a degree programme that appears outwardly impractical and even elitist in its goals to educate students practically to prepare them for a life beyond university? Davis in his article entitled 'The Practicality of an Impractical Education' (2017) considers the question 'do thinking skills gained through Liberal Arts and Humanities become practical?' In short, his answer is yes. Davis believes that the study of liberal arts and humanities offers a 'literacy of interpretation'. In everyday life, students are met with situations in which they must draw on a foundation of innovation and use analytical skills alongside critical thinking to make sense of what is happening around them. In offering an interpretation of an unknown situation, a student must be willing to think abstractly, challenge his/her (often firmly held) assumptions, develop methods or criteria to consider the context, identify evidence that will support an interpretation, be able to tolerate multiple perspectives or ambiguity and empathise with those involved in the situation. As a result of all of this, the student builds self confidence in his/her abilities and can additionally see patterns, predict responses and use the experience as a means of further future inquiry.

Why then is liberal arts study still considered widely 'irrelevant' in preparing students to join a work force? Davis offers his view that liberal education asks 'inconvenient questions' and even threatens the structure of vocational training and preparation traditionally believed to be the most valuable means of educating students. Is specialised technical training in higher education useful given technological advancements are outpacing most 3-year university degrees? In business, health, technology and even education itself, we will need to manage both coping with the here and now and being able to consider future offerings, predict future needs and plan for innovation. Davis claims that liberal arts education prepares students for all of this. He goes on to explain, '...the irony is that the skills of creativity, critical thinking and mental flexibility become practical by being applied

in situations or contexts not imagined until they occur. The potential to solve problems creatively can only be expressed when confronted with a problem.’ (p.263) Problem solving was an area promoted by RAIUL’s first year seminars which aimed to help students develop skills through discussion of real-life scenarios.

Liberal arts study claims to prepare graduates for the unknown as no one can accurately predict what the future holds. In a market where costs are mounting and practicalities are measured and scrutinised, offering ‘difference’ will inevitably raise questions particularly when the consumers are asked to suspend their disbelief and consider how general skills (that are often difficult to quantify) can prepare graduates for jobs of the future. Roche (2010) claims that the utility of liberal arts education is clear in its delivery of practical skills.

‘...a liberal arts education undermines a false concept of the useful as what is only immediately applicable. Such an education helps students develop formal skills that will allow them to flourish, whatever career paths they might choose or life choices they might make over time; indeed, many of the skills they develop will reveal their significance only later in life.’(157)

Our consumerist society is not poised to accept value on a ‘wait and see’ basis, however. We are conditioned to expect immediate results and benefits and are disappointed when outcomes are not mapped quickly to worth. Williams (2011) argues that this change in focus marks a clear shift in students’ identity from learners to consumers and also marks a change in the perception of the product of higher education from transformational education experience to simply a degree outcome and a positive student experience. ‘...the consumption model, in shifting the focus so successfully away from the learning processes and onto educational outcomes, denies the students the transformational potential of higher-level study in exchange for satisfactory experience and a suitable product (degree attainment).’

The mission, vision and values of an institution are the foundation of its reputation, but from a student’s perspective, the translation of these elements into a ‘quality’ educational experience is what really matters. Richmond’s reputation for ‘being different’ as described by some of the students in this study is a difficult concept to pin down: Is it different in its offerings? Different in its outcomes? Different in its experience? Or different in the way it approaches education altogether? On the face of the outward offer to students, the Richmond experience is very different from the alternatives in the marketplace. It offers a 4-year, broad-based degree programme with outlets for personal development and professional training through careers-related activities woven into the curriculum and through opportunities to take part in civic engagement, work experience in the form of

internships and research design and analysis throughout the four-year programme. The outcomes it aims to deliver are both the lofty ideals of global citizenship and life-long learning, but also the practical outcomes of increased student employability and positive student satisfaction. In this way liberal arts education is really not unlike its competitors in the marketplace.

The student experience aims to offer an inclusive, supportive, diverse and challenging environment where students have the ‘freedom and support’ to ‘challenge assumptions’ and think differently. (2019) The approach to education is different in that it focuses less on a delivery of knowledge in the form of a lecture and more on negotiating meaning with students through tutorials and discussions. This practice places the lecturer in a different role of facilitator or negotiator as opposed to authority figure in the classroom. The hierarchy of how education is delivered is different from the standard practise and this idea can be disruptive or even disturbing to those who believe the current system should not be challenged. In returning to Tinto’s (1987) theory that students must be both academically and socially engaged in the life of their university in order to persist and complete, it follows on that students who are engaged and integrated in their studies have a higher level of institutional commitment and perceive their efforts as a positive contribution to the university’s reputation. ‘[...when students are actively engaged] they feel committed to their respective organizations and the institution at large and are less likely than are disengaged students to leave.’ (Harper & Quaye, 2009) In short, those who engage actively and take on roles of responsibility during their course find themselves relating positively to the mission, vision and values of the institution and, as a result, foster positive feelings toward their university’s reputation.

Even with positive internal feelings of value and optimism toward the university, the external view of the liberal arts education as being elite, impractical and of little value to the general public still remains in the public arena. Harold Entwistle, an educational advocate and author of a number of works on education, (1970, 1997) described this phenomenon as relating to three key concepts espoused by critics of liberal education:

1. That the true value of liberal education exists in its intrinsic value—i.e. in learning for learning’s sake and this has significance only to a select few
2. That liberal education was created to educate an elite class of people to be managers and supervisors, not ‘doers’ and that this purpose has not changed over its several hundred years of existence

3. That liberal education has no practicality and no connection to everyday life as opposed to more traditional forms of training and education that offer practical, vocational skills

Entwistle challenges each of these notions in considering the aims and values of liberal education. He claims that learning for the sake of learning creates self-reliant, independent thinkers who, motivated by interest and driven by curiosity spend a life time in active roles within their communities making a difference in their own and others' everyday lives. To be active and to take part within your community, by definition requires 'doing' so to surmise that those educated in the liberal arts tradition are not active and not involved is a misconception. Finally, the connection to everyday life and everyday people, Entwistle argues, is clear. The practical skills delivered by liberal arts include important capabilities required for many different vocations and many different walks of life. Indeed, the skills required to be an active and able citizen are those that stretch far and wide and connect people of different backgrounds through civic engagement. Robert M. Hutchins (1953) a historical advocate of liberal arts and early proponent of the Great Books Curriculum at the University of Chicago, offers his view of liberal arts in consideration of its elitist reputation.

The foundation of democracy is universal suffrage. It makes every man a ruler. If every man is a ruler, every man needs the education that rulers ought to have. The kind of education that we accept now when everybody is destined to rule is fundamentally an extension of the kind that in Jefferson's time was suitable to those destined to labour, not to rule. When we talk of our political goals, we admit the right of every man to be a ruler. When we talk of our educational program, we see no inconsistency in saying that only a few have the capacity to get the education that rulers ought to have—either we should abandon the democratic ideal or we should help every citizen to acquire the education that is appropriate to free men. (199)

Hutchins' call to action, although written almost 70 years ago still rings true today particularly in an age of widening access to higher education where programmes and services are being offered to attract different students and help them achieve and persist throughout their years at university.

The challenge of building a positive reputation where historical ideas and opinions linger is quite difficult. This becomes a job of overcoming preconceptions and beliefs of what an educational offer is thought to be with solid information about what it really is in attempt to counteract public opinion and change perspective. Those students who left Richmond feeling the University's reputation was unsatisfactory complained, in part, about what they saw as impractical, useless activities leading to insufficient results. If we are to change

attitudes about the importance and value of liberal arts education, we will need to be more specific about the curriculum we chose to offer, the methods by which we teach and the outcomes (both short and longer term) that speak to the true value of the educational experience.

### **Quality of programme**

Quality is a concept that can be measured in a variety of ways and through a number of different methods. Our understanding of it is not universal and in speaking to students about what they believe a 'quality' educational experience to be, it is not uncommon to hear a wide range of responses. (Barnett, 1992) Likewise, quality from an institution's perspective may differ considerably from one university to the next. Definitions of quality will be dependent on the university's model, mission and vision for educating its population. Institutions will, of course, have accrediting bodies looking in to measure effective teaching and learning and the student experience, but they will also have external rankings looking outwardly to measure quality including their institutional successes and failures by comparing each institution's achievements to other institutions offering similar courses. Outward claims of quality in higher education within the marketplace most commonly rest in the agreed measurements of student satisfaction, graduate outcomes and employability and in the useful (and perhaps unique) opportunities and networks afforded to students during and after their course. These elements form the basis of rankings and other external measurements which ultimately result in building an institution's reputation. Considerable research time has been devoted to the framework by which quality is expressed in higher education, both internally and externally. (Alexander, 2000; Coates, 2007; Green, 1993)

Philip Altbach (2010) of Boston College sees university rankings as inevitable, though unavoidably flawed. In an attempt to measure global institutions using the same methods for establishing 'excellence', some institutions will always benefit and others will not. Larger institutions, smaller institutions, technical offerings, broad-based education, campus universities, commuter institutions: there are thousands of varieties and limiting a value assessment to one method will raise questions about the reliability of the outcomes. Still, being able to consider hundreds of institutions alongside each other with the click of a button is a practice that will not disappear anytime soon. Altbach claims, '[Rankings] are an inevitable result of mass higher education and of competition and commercialisation in post-secondary education worldwide.' (15) They may not offer entirely accurate

representations of quality in higher education, but they offer a perspective to the public that is easy to access and readily consumable.

Because of its dual US/UK accreditation, Richmond University finds itself in the unique position of not being eligible to participate in US rankings because of its location. This, in turn, means that US comparable institutions (which may have more in common with Richmond than their UK counterparts) are not evaluated in the same set. UK rankings, however, including the National Student Survey (measuring student satisfaction) and Graduate Outcomes (measuring graduate destinations after course completion) are a part of Richmond's external evaluation and because of its small size and individualised approach to teaching and learning, Richmond often performs quite well.<sup>42</sup>

All of these external evaluative measures serve to relay a message to prospective students about quality and performance within the market. When students were initially surveyed about their reasons for choosing to study at Richmond, they cited four main reasons for joining: the location, the US/UK degree, the options for work-related activities/training and the flexibility of the academic programmes. Inward measurements of quality assurance can consist of any number of factors including the evaluation of student learning, measurements of students' capabilities including purposefully taught skill, specific competencies, work readiness and even engagement over the period of a course. (Coates, 2005) Obviously, the physical location of the University is a matter of convenience, but the value attributed to the other areas students cited as important including dual accreditation, practical skill advancement and flexibility could all be measurable elements of a positive student experience—and perhaps most importantly, measurements of difference within the market.

This idea of difference and uniqueness appears again and again as students give the reasons for their attraction to the academic programmes at Richmond, for attending the University, and in some cases, the students' motivating factor for staying on to complete their degrees. American colleges and universities have a considerably long history of diverse offerings and 'difference' largely because of the sheer number of higher education institutions there are within the country, but also because of the appeal to the consumer of a unique experience that relates to individuals instead of a mass experience that relates to

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<sup>42</sup> In 2018, Richmond achieved an 85% student satisfaction rating in the National Student Survey. The Graduate Outcomes Survey 2016 (then DLHE) showed 93% of students who had graduated 15 months before were either employed full time or registered on full time post graduate study.

many. 'Difference' as it relates to choice is an important area of differentiation amongst institutions and, unsurprisingly, an important part of marketing in a consumer-driven industry. Finding the right university with the right fit as a perspective student is about finding an experience that best suits an individual's needs. In the case of the students in this study, the experience that they hoped to join included a diverse, flexible programme with outlets for practical skill development in the form of work or career-related activities.

In terms of flexibility, Richmond's programme offers students the opportunity to take modules in different areas, enrol at different study locations and the ability to transfer university course credit from one institution to another. This means that instead of being tied to a single campus with a finite number of peers and lecturers, Richmond students can experience difference from any number of college/university campuses around the world. This flexibility and choice can mean opportunities to try new things and to see things from different perspectives without the fear of losing time on the degree. It allows for a wider perspective in teaching and learning and paired with the broad-based curriculum, can offer a truly diverse experience. Finding value in difference and diversity is an important trend in higher education as well as in business. Top performing companies are more innovative, perform better in comparison to less diverse businesses and show more growth when they employ a diverse team of people (Phillips, 2017).

There is much research supporting the value of diversity in its ability to spark innovation, provoke new ways of thinking and enrich outcomes, but there is less about the challenges of working within a diverse population. Although students single out diversity and difference as an important factor in their choice to study and stay at Richmond, the difficulties associated with integrating into a diverse student community should not be underestimated. As Tinto's theory of student integration highlights, separating from the past and transitioning into a new community can be difficult, painful and for some students, not a step they are able or willing to take. Being willing and able to consider new perspectives and disassociate yourself with your old assumptions about how things work requires a leap of faith and a belief that the work in which you are taking part is important and relevant. Phillips (2017) argues that 'the pain associated with diversity can be thought of as the pain of exercise. You have to push yourself to grow your muscles. The pain, as the old saw goes, produces the gain. In just the same way, we need diversity—in teams, organizations and society as a whole---if we are going to change grow and innovate.'

Beyond diversity, the measurable practicalities of building skills for employment topped students' list of reasons why they chose to study at Richmond. Skill development in these areas link to students' common goal of distinguishing themselves as employable within a sea of young people with undergraduate degrees. The skills promoted within the first-year modules were pre-defined by the curriculum and responded to the criticisms of industry employers about the current workforce. These included: communication skills, the ability to work with others, critical thinking and analysis, problem solving, resilience, flexibility, adaptability, tolerance for ambiguity and self-management. Students were initially asked to rate their skills and abilities in these areas at the start of their first year and were later asked to consider what strides they had made in skills improvement by the end of their first year. The skills in which students felt they had made the most progress: communication skills, resilience, critical thinking/analysis and self-reliance were all purposefully taught within the classroom and practised throughout the year in activities and programmes. Positive comments seem to indicate that students associated value with these activities.

*I feel better prepared for the working world than others who haven't taken part in a liberal arts course.*

*I found the support for study skills useful.*

*I learned how to improve my skills.*

Others, however, felt that there was no value in the skill development being offered by the programme and considered this portion of the module 'redundant' and 'useless'.

*I personally don't believe this University is giving the right skills for students to enter the job force.*

*The liberal arts system didn't work well for me.*

There are a number of factors that could contribute to students' perceptions of value on this course—some of them are internal factors including the learning environment, the student's peer group, the associated activities and the articulated link between tasks and potential outcomes. Although the University has some control over a number of the internal factors, the individual student's experience is complex and impossible to compartmentalize. In addition, value to one may be worthlessness to another, but in agreeing community values, the aim is to work together (ideally in agreement of a method or methods) toward a common goal. At the start of the module, students expressed their enthusiasm with the programme and their positive intentions for the future, as the year

wore on, however, some attitudes shifted and a number of students struggled to see the value in their choice to study at the university.

The external factors involved in the measurement of value include the cost of attendance, the availability of family support and encouragement and the political climate (amongst others) which over recent years has stirred fears of student debt and unemployment causing considerable anxiety on university campuses. (UK Education Committee, 2018) Although the university has little control over external factors, acknowledging that they are contributors to the way students perceive their education is an important step in managing the student experience and considering the causes and effects of progression and retention.

Whatever the contributors of students' engagement or disengagement with the course, some persisted with the programme while others left feeling disheartened by a low quality, inadequate experience. Tinto's theory of student involvement offers some insight into reasons students get involved, stay involved and ultimately persist, but what have those who chose to leave missed in making the decision to end their course? Over the years, Tinto's initial theory of student involvement has been further considered and expanded to include psychosocial student development in framing student persistence, particularly within the first year. (Bentler & Speckart, 1979, Fishbein & Azjen, 1975, Bandura, 1997) These theories start with the idea that the student begins university with a set of personal characteristics which are important components in the deciding factor for students to choose to take part and integrate into the academic community or disengage and leave. As the student begins to interact, he develops self-efficacy (Bandura) and self-assurance which in turn motivates him to take on more responsibility and control for his own learning. This increases involvement drives academic success and social membership.

Braxton (2000) reports that 'these processes in turn lead to academic and social integration, institutional fit and loyalty, intent to persist and to the behaviours in question, persistence itself.' (58) Persistence requires resilience—an important skill that employers are looking for and one that universities are eager to hone. With resilience, personal setbacks are simply a blip along the path of overall achievement. Holdsworth (2018) sees resilience as an attitude toward learning which universities can play a role in developing. He claims resilience is developed when 'students believe that intellectual abilities are qualities that can be developed (and are not fixed.)' This allows for a growth mindset whereby smaller achievements including skill development or knowledge acquisition are

viewed as integral pieces of larger learning outcomes. With resilience, students bring optimism and positive attitudes toward learning. This in turn initiates positive feelings toward the student's overall learning experience and motivates perceptions of quality and value for money.

In building a model for student retention which considers lack of integration and distancing from the educational mission, perhaps the best starting point is a means of teaching, supporting and practicing resilience from within the community. As Tinto and others point out, separating from the comfort of one's past can be traumatic, but building skills that enhance self-reliance, improve self-confidence and engage students in the activity of learning to learn can lead to a transformational experience where quality and value for money are considered positively and the university's reputation is also enhanced.

## Chapter 11: Final Comments

How can a degree that appears so outwardly impractical in comparison to its competitors offer practical skills in preparation for life after university? With a consumer-driven agenda in higher education, are the group goals of good citizenship and life-long learning still relevant to students today? Martha Nussbaum (1997), in her book entitled *Cultivating Humanity*, calls for support of liberal studies and in doing so, weighs up the value of individualised vocational training alongside what she sees as the essentials of civic education and the need to maintain and support democracy.

It now seems to many administrators (and parents and students) too costly to indulge in the apparently useless business of learning for the enrichment of life. Many institutions that call themselves liberal arts colleges have turned increasingly to vocational studies, curtailing humanities requirements and cutting back on humanities faculty—in effect giving up on the idea of extending the benefits of a liberal education to their varied students. In a time of economic anxiety, such proposals often win support. But they sell our democracy short, preventing it from becoming as inclusive and reflective as it ought to be. People who have never learned to use reason and imagination to enter a broader world of cultures, groups and ideas are impoverished personally and politically, however successful their vocational preparation. (2010)

Positive, progressive citizenship and the support of democracy are indeed important goals for the future of humanity, but are they what students look for in their decision to attend university? As a dual-accredited American University situated in the UK, Richmond also offers a unique perspective to students on citizenship and the value of community engagement. Many of the University's students are not UK citizens and are therefore not eligible to engage civically in the same way as those who have the rights to vote and action change democratically. What the programme offers, however, is an opportunity to become a part of a large, diverse capital city in which civic debate, service and citizenship can be viewed from a number of perspectives and challenges faced by its residents can be considered on a broader, global scale, some with a very clear connection to others around the world.

Much research has been conducted about why students opt to take part in higher education and their reasons are almost without fail about individualised goals of career aspirations and personal gain, both financially and through social mobility. (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Cooper 2007) In searching for a university, students look for a number of characteristics that they believe will help them develop and prepare for life beyond university. They look for academic challenge, careers support, networking opportunities and a degree that will ideally guide them to a lucrative career. (Hartog, 1998) Although

some students are able to project into the future about their hopes and dreams, many young people look to the present to make decision on what happens next. These personal ambitions highlight the requirement students (as consumers) have for a return on the investment they are making both psycho-physically in the time, energy and effort they put into their studies, but also financially in the tuition and other related costs they have invested in their course. In searching for ways to match value to experience, it seems only logical to consider the relevancy of the degree plan to meet the aspirations of a career path.

In the Chronicle of Higher Education's 2019 roundtable discussion on 'Preparing Students for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Careers', careers directors, policy specialists and advisors came together to discuss how to help students reach their personal goals at university while also balancing the importance of learning and knowledge transfer. Participants discussed the need for 'dexterity' and a broad range of skills both of which, they felt, are required to cope in today's working world. Smith-Lewis (2019), the Director of the Career Pathways Initiative at UCNF, argues that no matter your course of study, all students need skills to compete in today's job market.

If you're an art-history major or a mathematician, you still have to have the 21<sup>st</sup> century skill sets: project management, information literacy, computational understanding—because it's where the world is today.

Skills for the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not technical and discipline-specific, but rather carry a breadth of requirements in areas that are relevant to many different career paths and vocations. Although the practicalities of liberal arts study rest in the intentionally taught transferrable skills (and knowledge) presented as part of the degree, the claims of value and relevancy are perhaps best grasped in the opportunities for transformative learning experiences that can lead to positive citizenship and life-long learning. (Silva, 2008; Brevik, 2005; Playfair, 2019) As this study has featured, engagement and involvement are the keys to student progression and retention within the liberal arts system and this requires a belief that the work being put into the programme will result in positive effects. In 2018 and again in 2019 as part of the UK's National Student Survey<sup>43</sup>, Richmond University decided to ask an optional question about its liberal arts offering. The question asked to final year students was about their feelings concerning the relevancy and value of the liberal arts offer.

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<sup>43</sup> <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>

‘Was Richmond’s Liberal Arts approach relevant or useful to you in your students at Richmond the American International University in London or in preparing you for life after Richmond and why?’

Just over half of the participants answered the question with a free text response. From these responses, just under 65% indicating that the liberal arts offer was relevant, useful, engaging and mind-opening for them. These positive comments formed three main groups of responses which included the following:

1. **That liberal arts offers opportunities for cross-disciplinary discovery and different ways of considering the world**
  - ‘it offered a wide variety of options to complement the main course’
  - ‘it diversified my work’
  - ‘it helped to expand the way I think’
  - ‘it gave me a wider perspective...helped to tie together concepts’
  - ‘it allowed for cross-disciplinary critical thinking’
  - ‘it brought together theory and practice’
  - ‘it helped me [to] ask questions and [to] think critically’
2. **That liberal arts offers useful opportunities to learn and expand new skills and motivates critical thinking and respect for different viewpoints**
  - ‘it gave [me] opportunities to develop important skills
  - ‘it was practical and useful in demonstrating how and what the real world feels like’
  - ‘it was helpful in a world where interdisciplinary adaptability and confidence are necessary and deeply valued’
  - ‘I have developed better communication and presentation skills thanks to the liberal arts degree...[now] we can tackle the challenges we face in the future.’
  - ‘it helped me find my feet, be prepared and adjust’
  - ‘it helped me express my interests and engage with others’
  - ‘it was very useful to learn about different subjects...[it] can help you understand yourself and your potential career.’
  - ‘it helped me become more open-minded and have respect for others’ opinions’
3. **That liberal arts offers the opportunity to explore a broad range of subjects which becomes a platform for further inquiry and study**
  - ‘it offered a broad platform of study to build from’
  - ‘it was useful learning a little about a lot’
  - ‘it helped me broaden my interests—I know a lot more about different disciplines’
  - ‘it was interesting to explore and discover other subjects’
  - ‘liberal arts study is relevant and broad.’
  - ‘it is a good foundation into just about anything’
  - ‘it is important to individuals and to you as a member of a group.’

Negative comments about the liberal arts offer formed 30% of the responses while another 5% seemed confused about what liberal arts study actually was or whether or not they had taken part in it. The negative comments were mostly concerned with irrelevance, uselessness and the waste of time and the energy this programme took away from the main course of study.

'the approach didn't help me at all'  
'it did not seem relevant to my degree'  
'it didn't aid at all in career [development]'  
'the extra courses...have been extremely useless'  
'it definitely didn't prepare me for life after uni'  
'it was redundant to my degree'  
'the classes just slowed the process for graduation'  
'there was nothing to study in the first year and it was a waste of time...irrelevant'  
'it was not practical—I have left university not knowing where in the world I belong.'

It appears that even after some time on a course, a good portion of the population of students are still unwilling or unable to see liberal arts education as affording them any advantage in terms of practical skill and utility for future careers and/or study. This disillusionment with the offer may come in part with the public accountability for higher education in general and the public opinion that the measurable worth in an expensive degree course that offers only questionable utility simply cannot be value for money.

Accountability in higher education is a theme that has permeated discussions about universities and university life for over four decades. It traces back to discussions on value for money and a growing opinion from policy makers, funding bodies and the public at large that higher education has been left to its own devices for too long and has not been held properly accountable for its outcomes.

Society is not prepared to accept that higher education is self-justifying and wishes to expose the activities of the secret garden. With greater expectations being placed on it, higher education is being obliged to examine itself or be examined by others. (Barnett, 1992, p.16)

With changes in US educational funding starting in the 1980s and more to follow in the UK in the 1990s and beyond and with a public outcry to ensure higher education is more efficient, more productive and ultimately more accountable, universities have found themselves in a precarious position of being required to respond to societal and economic demands, but also attempting to keep their autonomy to deliver courses and programmes that they felt were important to their unique institutional missions.(Alexander, 2000) Berdahl (1990) framed this confused existence as a struggle between funding bodies and internal quality demands. In this state, '[universities] are both involved and withdrawn, both serving and criticizing, both needing and being needed.' (p.170) Balancing this difficult relationship has, at times, provoked change in the way that higher education is offered and delivered---from expanded accessibility and enrolment to more vocational training and on-line offerings, content and structure have been adapted as providers have had to become

more flexible and open to change. Inevitably, trade-offs will occur. Premfors (1982) explains the strained relationship as a compromise between the values of higher education, namely equality, excellence, autonomy, accountability and efficiency and the realisation of these values in public policy outcomes which include increased access, public performance analysis of research and teaching, internal decision-making as a means of holding onto institutional uniqueness, measurable outcomes in graduation rates, student satisfaction and employability and finally a more concise and demonstrable reflection of value for money.

The liberal arts offer has had to adapt both its content and delivery in an attempt to manage criticisms about its lack of practicalities and value for money. These changes have taken the form of skill development sometimes at the expense of knowledge transfer and vocational training in place of expanding thought. This, in turn, has meant criticism from others who feel the core of the liberal arts offer is to teach and give opportunities to learn purely for learning's sake and for the value of taking a critical approach to life itself. But do universities realistically only have a single purpose to fulfil? Bok (2013) explains a change in the objectives of universities from the early outputs of training an elite population of men to perform in careers of service to their community to objectives more focused on measurable outputs that serve to support and stimulate the economy and ultimately help in achieving national goals. The three main objectives Bok describes are 1. preparation for a useful occupation 2. research, scientific inquiry and scholarship to harness innovation and 3. training and skill development to produce well-rounded citizens of the world.

All three of these goals speak to a practical means of measuring the output of university, but it seems the public opinion on higher education, particularly the liberal arts offer, is still that it lacks a connection to the real world and is more generic and broad than it is useful and applicable. Universities continue to take in criticism about being non-responsive to the needs of their local communities and about not taking on the economic demands for which policy-makers feel universities should ultimately be responsible. Vocational training and technical skills have emerged alongside philosophy and history courses. Students are also routinely trained in research methods to further their interests and abilities to engage with academic inquiry and lastly, in preparing graduates for a lifetime of good citizenship, universities are looking to engender positive beliefs in students about their abilities to make a difference to the lives of those around them. It seems the practicalities associated with studying an undergraduate university degree are applicable, visible and tangible for all to see. Even so, in a 2012 Time/Carnegie survey in the US, over 80% of the public

population surveyed commented that they believe ‘...at many colleges, there is too much of a disconnect between the courses offered and the students’ career goals.’ With the general agreement amongst undergraduate students that a university degree prepares you for a chosen occupation and is a promise of more opportunities and perhaps a better lifestyle, Bok challenges higher education providers to think creatively about how to convince undergraduates that there is much more to value in an undergraduate education than simply a career output. ‘A more thoughtful empirically informed account is required to get students to appreciate the reasons why investing time and effort in a well-rounded education, a particular major, or an individual course could make a difference to their lives both during and after college.’ (Sanburn, 2012)

How can we reframe the liberal arts offer to showcase its added value in areas such as skill development, interdisciplinary, critical thought and innovation at a time when value for money and accountability in higher education are more important than ever? I believe there are three main messages about the practical outcomes in the liberal arts that should be communicated more widely and more effectively:

1. There are many very practical, useful skills presented within liberal arts study that can prepare students for work and can also make them more interesting to employers in comparison to students who have had a rigorous vocational education. These skills are not technical, but they are applicable to a variety of fields of work and study. To learn these skills effectively, a student must engage with the course physically and mentally and seek out opportunities to self-develop. Students who feel that these skills are not important or feel that they have already developed them to the required level have lost sight of the need for continuous improvement and self-reflection especially as it relates to personal and professional development.
2. Learning through the discussion of real-world problems has a potentially collaborative extension of encouraging students to engage with their communities, participate as active citizens and take on roles of leadership that bring value to themselves and others. In filling the role of active citizen, students seek out solutions and outcomes collectively by analysing the situation, thinking through potential solutions and their affects and negotiating with others to an agreed outcome.
3. Participating actively in a diverse, multi-faceted learning community which actively encourages self-reliant learning and inquiry inevitably challenges students to think

creatively and to be innovative. Interdisciplinary study aims to encourage students to see every-day issues from a number of different perspectives and inspires them to challenge agreed assumptions and think beyond the obvious solutions to outcomes that positively affect everyone involved.

In a world where students and parents are searching for the certainty of value for money and the promise of a job post-graduation, the unfortunate truth that uncertainty is a part of life for all of us no matter which path we choose to take is a difficult realisation to take in.

Liberal education urges upon us a reflectiveness, a tentativeness, a humility, a hospitality to other points of view, a carefulness to be open to correction and new insight, than can mitigate these tendencies toward polarity, rigidity and tolerance...That is why a liberal education seeks to impress upon students that one of the most important words in the English language is 'perhaps' and that we would all do better if we prefaced our most emphatic statements with that modest qualifier. (Freedman, 2003, p.57-58)

Liberal arts education offers students a broad-based education with opportunities to be creative and innovative, to develop and hone a range of practical, transferrable skills and to better understand the values and importance of global citizenship. As one participant in this study expressed,

*I have really enjoyed my first year here at Richmond. I feel the international environment adds to the learning and the liberal arts education enhances your skills for entering work in a global city.*

This study indicates that if students engage with the University's offerings and take part in the full student experience, meaning offerings both inside and outside of the classroom, they can gain skills that link to a range of employment options, further study, increased civic engagement and personal development.

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## *Appendices*

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## Institute of Education, University of London

### Ethics Approval for Doctoral Student Research Projects: Data Sheet

*Please read the notes before completing the form*

Project title	Student identification with Liberal Arts as a motivator for retention		
Student Name	Allison Cole-Stutz		
Supervisor	Charlie Owen		
Advisory committee members			
School/Unit		Faculty	-----
Intended start date of data collection	01/12/2010		
Funder	Self		
Professional Ethics code used	BERA		

#### **Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?**

If your research is based in another institution then you may be required to submit your research to that institution's ethics review process. If your research involves patients or staff recruited through the NHS then you will need to apply for ethics approval through an NHS Local Research Ethics Committee. In either of these cases, you don't need ethics approval from the Institute of Education. If you have gained ethics approval elsewhere, please detail it here:

NA
----

#### **Research participants**

Does the research involve human participants?

- Yes, as a primary source of data (*e.g. through interviews*)
- Yes, as a secondary source of data (*e.g. using existing data sets*)
- No *Please explain* \_\_\_\_\_

If the research involves human participants, who are they? (tick all that apply)

Early years/pre-school

Adults *please describe them below*

School-aged children

First year University students

Young people aged 17-18

Unknown

**Research methods to be used** (tick all that apply – this information will be recorded on a database of the types of work being presented to Ethics Committees)

Interviews

Systematic review

Focus groups

Randomised controlled trial

Questionnaire

Literature review

Action research

Use of personal records

Observation

Other

## **Institute of Education, University of London**

### **Ethics Approval for Doctoral Student Research Projects:**

#### **Planned Research and Ethical considerations.**

**1. Summary of planned research** (please indicate the purpose of the research, its aims, main research questions, and research design. It's expected that this will take approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary)

**The purpose of this research is to observe a possible correlation first-year international students who identify strongly with the ethos of a general (liberal arts) education and their ability to persist through their first year at an international university abroad.**

**The research design consists of a survey for all students enrolled in the First Year Program at Richmond, the American International University in London (approximately 100 students). These surveys would be coded and 3 groups would ideally be identified (those who strongly identify with the ideals of general education, those you moderately identify and those who do not identify at all.)**

**The surveys and coding would be followed by interviews and focus groups in order to better understand students' experiences as they relate to the curriculum.**

**The final part of the research design is a quantitative study of re-enrolment statistics for these students in the second year and withdrawal surveys from those who chose to leave the program.**

#### **2. Specific ethical issues**

(Outline the main ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research, and how they will be addressed. It's expected that this will require approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary. You will find information in the notes about answering this question)

**The participants in this study will be first year university students between the ages of 17 and 22. They will be informed of the research through the Director of the First Year Program. Each student will be asked to complete a consent form before participating in the study.**

**Although the questions asked in the surveys and interviews are not of a sensitive nature, students may have concerns about my accessing their academic information and how this may relate to the study.**

**Students identities will be protected, but as in any small scale study, insiders may be able to identify participants within the group having worked closely with them.**

### **3. Attachments**

Please attach the following items to this form:

- The proposal or project outline for the project
- Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee, if applicable
- Where available, information sheets and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research.

### **4. Declaration**

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project			
Signed		Date	2/11/2010



8 September 2014

Dear Student,

I am conducting some research into the first-year experience at RAIUL as part of a doctoral course in International Education at the Institute of Education, University of London. The data collected in this research may also be used in internal discuss at the University to make institutional improvements to your student experience.

As part of the study, I am asking for first year students enrolled on the FYS to participate in several anonymised surveys, to join a focus group and to allow for data about your participation in activities and events related to your course, your academic achievement and your course feedback to be used in an anonymised way. **Participation is, of course, voluntary.**

Although personal attributes such as gender and nationality will be used to consider the group as a whole, no data which identifies individuals will be used in the study.

I would be grateful for your participation.

Sincerely,

Allison Cole-Stutz  
Dean of Students  
colesta@richmond.ac.uk

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Student ID Number \_\_\_\_\_

I consent to the use of my personal data as agreed above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## i. Initial Survey Summary & Individual Responses First Year Seminar Survey on Liberal Arts

Respondents: 48 displayed, 48 total      Status: Open  
 Launched Date: 26/10/2014      Closed Date: 25/11/2014

Display all pages and questions      Page 1  
 1. Why did you choose Richmond?

2. What do you think are the most valuable parts of...

Display: 3. The liberal arts tradition relies on students...      0 filters

4. Do you believe the skills you are developing now...

5. How closely do you relate to the University's...

Active Report Filters: None Active.      Disabled

### 1. Why did you choose Richmond?

		Response Total	Response Percent
a flexible degree plan		14	12%
dual (US/UK) accreditation		31	28%
opportunities for work experience		16	14%
an alumni network with connections worldwide		8	7%
London location		33	29%
Other, please specify		10	9%
		Total Respondents	48

Didn't have any other choice.

Sense of community

The only university that would except me

Small Campus

Michael Barclay and the globe.

Multicultural environment

Didn't know what i wanted to to, plus it was close to home.

Offered me most financial aid

interesting classes

Price and Location.

2. What do you think are the most valuable parts of your liberal arts degree programme?

		Response Total	Response Percent
to learn valuable skills for employment		24	20%
to make learning fun and interesting (learning for learning's sake)		16	13%
to be involved in the challenges and rewards of interdisciplinary study		13	11%
to get a more 'well rounded' education		33	28%

to think creatively and be innovative		29	24%
---------------------------------------	---	----	-----

Other, please specify		5	4%
-----------------------	---	---	----

1. I don't think it is a valuable system.
2. ... Only when the courses actually relate to your major
3. Lets people who aren't sure what they want to do in life find out, rather than just decide before getting here.
4. The close interaction between students and teachers
5. none of the above. I prefer more technical schools.

3.The liberal arts tradition relies on students challenging themselves outside of the classroom. Do you currently participate in or plan to participate in...(please tick all that apply to you)

		Response Total	Response Percent
Student Clubs & Societies		26	24%
Leadership Opportunities (student representation, student ambassadors, residence life, etc)		13	12%
Work experience, volunteering, internships		32	29%
Careers-related seminars		16	15%
Student Employment		17	15%
Other, please specify		6	5%
		Total Respondents	43

1. None
2. Director of an established company.
3. none , not enough time because of all the lessons
4. [No Answer Entered]
5. Playing music
6. traveling, exploring, etc.

4. Do you believe the skills you are developing now (critical thinking, research and writing, interdisciplinary study, flexibility, adaptability, resilience, etc) will help you later in your studies and beyond?

	Response Total	Response Percent
Yes, definitely	33	69%
Probably	9	19%
Not sure	2	4%
I don't think so	4	8%
Total Respondents		48

5. How closely do you relate to the University's mission of delivering high quality teaching and learning to students with a commitment to internationalism, cosmopolitanism and diversity?

	Response Total	Response Percent
I relate closely	25	52%

to the mission

I relate in part to the mission



22 46%

I don't relate to the mission at all



1 2%

Total Respondents 48

### iii. Focus Group Transcript

#### 24 February 2015, 17:30, ACS Office (Main Building)

**Interviewer:** Well, I'm going to start recording now. First, I want to say thanks for meeting with me this afternoon and thank you so much for giving your time to this project. I am really hoping that what I learn from you will help the university improve our first-year programmes for students.

I'm going to get started with some questions if you're ready?

**Subject 1:** Yep

**Subject 2:** Sure

**Subject 3:** (nods)

**Interviewer:** Ok, so my first question is: why did you choose to enrol at Richmond and what was the deciding factor when it came time to make your decision?

**Subject 1:** I chose Richmond because it is easy to get to from Central London and because I'm working in the city, it was far enough to keep that life separate from my University life—which I really want to do. I also like the international student body and it's small enough that you sort of have to integrate with other students. I don't think you find this kind of community at bigger, more main stream universities.

**Interviewer:** What about the two of you?

**Subject 2:** Ok, well I'll go first. Honestly, I chose Richmond on a whim. I was looking at schools in California, Texas and New York and I saw some information about studying abroad in London...and then I realised that I could do a whole degree in London and I thought that sounded really cool. I thought it would be a good chance for me to get away from home and do something different. I graduated (from high school) last year and I saw a lot of my friends sticking around. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to meet people from different cultures and try to see things from different angles.

**Subject 3:** Yeah, me too. I am from a small town in the Midwest and I really wanted to do something different. My Richmond degree will translate back to the US, but it gives me the opportunity to study abroad and see things differently. I didn't want to stay at home only to live and study with the same group of people. Richmond sort of gave me the chance to do something different.

**Interviewer:** What expectations do you think you brought with you in your first year?

**Subject 2:** Well, I was hoping to find a sense of community and friends. At home, everyone knows you and your brother and your mother and...here I can work on my social skills and meet new people. I have met a lot of interesting people, but you have to put yourself out there.

**Subject 1:** It sounds a bit corny, but I wanted to change, grow...to find a new side of myself and I thought I could do that in coming to Richmond...and I think I have to some extent...

There are a lot of students here who don't really feel the same, though. They expect everything, but don't put much of themselves into adapting.

**Subject 3:** I was really most excited about studying in London. I wanted to find ways to use the city as part of my degree... if you know what I mean. I have found ways to do this, but like (Subject 2) said, you have to work a lot of that out for yourself.

**Interviewer:** Ok, thanks for that. After a semester and a bit, would say that your initial expectations have met reality? You both (pointing to subjects 2 and 3) mentioned that you have to 'put yourself out there'—did you expect more programs or services as a first-year student?

**Subject 2:** For me, I guess it was really about coming from home and the change to moving to another country. Having to do things for yourself is a part of being an adult, I guess, and this was always going to happen. I think it's just a steep learning curve studying so far away.

**Subject 1:** I think there are lots of opportunities for students to get involved, meet each other, learn and do something different, but not everyone wants to do this. There are some really motivated, dedicated, ambitious students, but there are also a lot who aren't and that hurts the experience for others.

**Subject 3:** I think moving abroad to study at a place like Richmond requires a certain type of personality and people who are ambitious and interested do fine. The students who don't have these qualities will struggle and may decide this isn't the place for them.

**Interviewer:** Ok, thank. Richmond's first year student experience is meant to engage students in University life fully. What steps have you taken to engage yourself in what the University has to offer?

**Subject 3:** I started a club out of my interest in going to museums and galleries. I am not an art major, but I love going to new places and seeing new things. I've also done a bit of travelling and gotten involved in some events put on by the school.

**Subject 2:** I joined ResLife and work with a great team of people. I've also travelled a bit and gone out a lot socially.

**Subject 1:** I wanted to get involved in clubs and societies so I joined the film club, MUN and Richmond Free Press. There's lots of great support given to students who want to start clubs, but the club leadership lacks management and consistency. I don't entirely know what some of them do besides use University money to throw parties! I am on the ResLife team too. It's different—it's like family...but a bit separated from the rest of the University.

**Subject 2:** Yeh, that is true. I think people don't always really know what we do.

**Subject 1:** I think it's partly because we don't promote our successes often enough. I also think student representation at Richmond is a joke. People like to complain about things not happening, but they don't want to do anything to change it.

**Interviewer:** Let's talk a little bit about the core curriculum. The aim of a liberal arts curriculum is to provide a foundation of skills that will support students in their development as independent learners. The skills that the core curriculum strives to teach,

train and enhance are: flexibility, adaptability, awareness of diversity, self-reflection and motivation, critical thinking, problem solving, communication and negotiation. Can you think of activities, events or programs in which you were given opportunities to build these skills (inside and/or outside of the classroom)?

**Subject 1:** I think there's no question that the liberal arts curriculum is Richmond's USP, but I am frustrated about the constant change of it. Last year students had to take fewer courses than they do this year...it isn't very consistent. I've done a few LEAD seminars, but these weren't advertised well and so they weren't very well attended. I think this goes back to the type of student Richmond is attracting. Students think that the job of professors is to engage them and although this makes a great professor, it is the responsibility of students to want to learn. I don't think the majority of the students here really want that.

**Subject 2:** I think the core classes helped me see things from a different perspective, but you don't always feel that way when you're in the middle of them....I think if you commit to them (the courses) you can change the way you think and really appreciate what you have more. It's like seeing things from a 360 degree view instead of just one angle.

**Subject 3:** Well, for me there was a lot of variety...which is good...but some of the classes seemed a bit directionless. I wondered why we were doing the things we were doing...overall I think they (the classes) were useful, but when I was in them, it didn't always feel that way.

**Interviewer:** Ok, we're nearing the end now-- what are your motivations moving forward in your degree program and do you see yourself becoming more or less engaged in University life? What are your plans for the coming academic year?

**Subject 3:** I definitely want to get more involved. I want to get into the city more and travel a bit more too. I plan to join a few more clubs and I am thinking about a study abroad semester as some point in the future.

**Subject 2:** I definitely see myself getting more engaged and involved. I've seen a lot of London in my first year. I am now looking forward to being more challenged within my major. I want to learn and grow.

**Subject 1:** I am taking on a role as a Resident Director and I will be the chair of the Richmond Free Press, so I will definitely be taking on more. I was disappointed to find that Richmond doesn't offer a business incubator for students interested in social ventures and enterprise. I am going to talk to some of the business faculty about potentially starting this up. Most universities have this, but it's missing here.

**Interviewer:** Ok, last question-- If you had it to do again, what would you change about your first year experience? Are there things you would do differently? What? Why? Are there things you think the University should do differently? What? Why?

**Subject 2:** For me, I would get involved earlier on. I was slow to commit to things, so I would start earlier. I had a great experience last term, but I think the school should market and advertise opportunities more widely or maybe just more consistently. Students get

preoccupied with other things and don't think about what they might be missing--- especially first year students.

**Subject 3:** I think I would find more ways to integrate my studies with what's happening in London... it would be good to have something kind of like a 'Time Out' for first years. There's so much to see and do and time passes so quickly.

**Subject 1:** I'll not sure I'd do anything differently—what's done is done. Looking back, I might utilize the city more like you mentioned (pointing to subject 3) and try to encourage some management changes that would make for a more involved, interesting academic community.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for taking part in this focus group. I will be transcribing this recording very soon and will send you all a copy to review. I really appreciate your time.

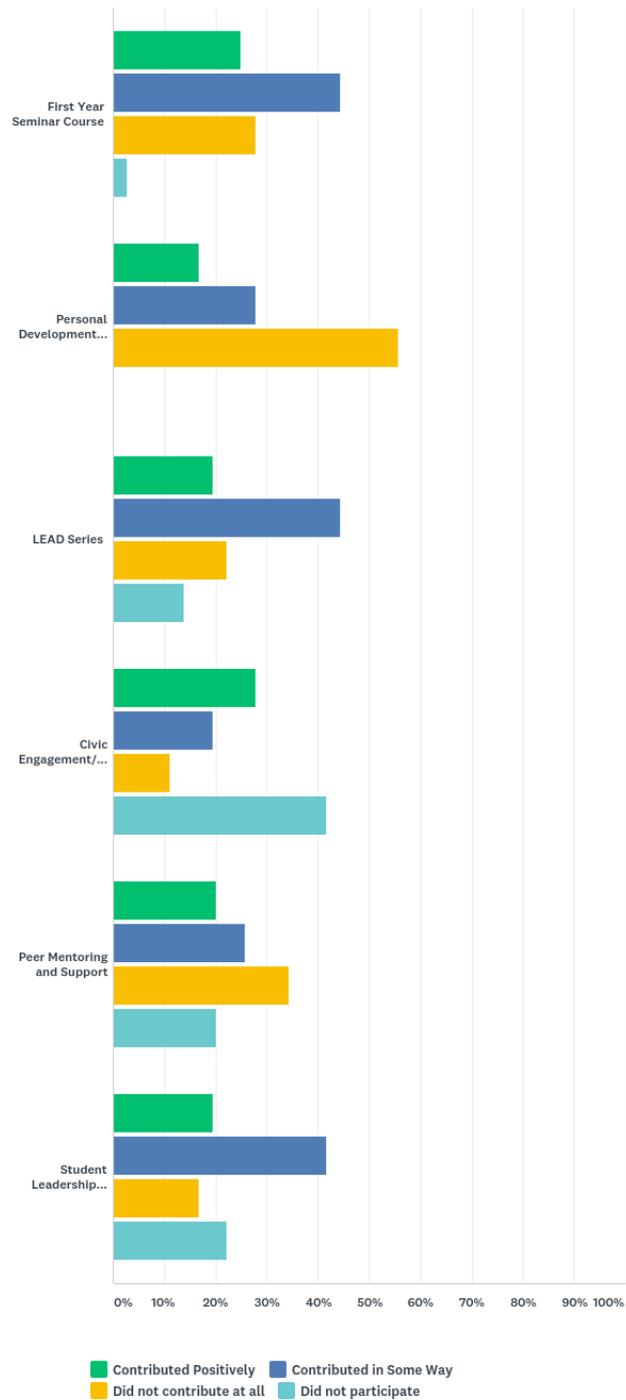
**Subject 2:** No problem.

**Subject 1:** Thank you

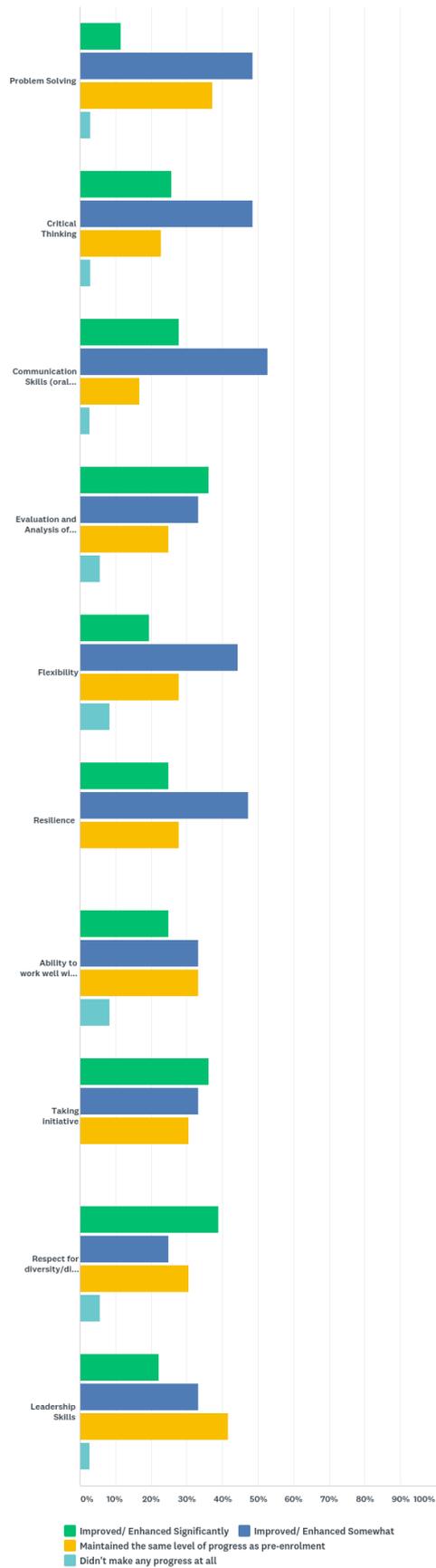
**Subject 3:** Thanks

## iv. Final Survey: Liberal Arts Studies & Practical Skills

Q1 As you are nearing the end of your first academic year at Richmond, please tell us how you feel the following activities have contributed to your experience.

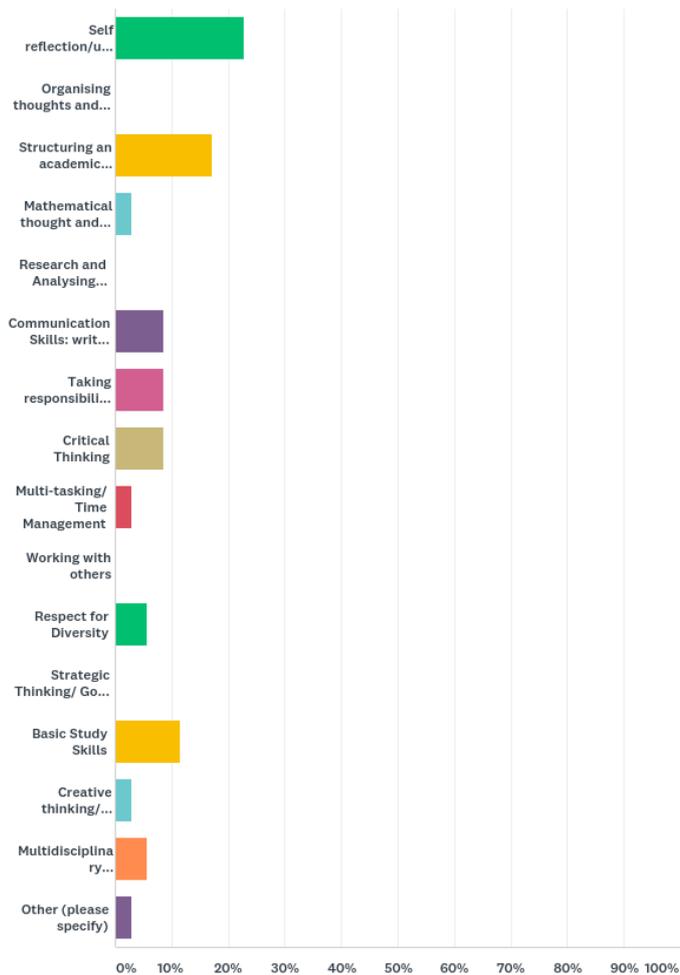


Q2 Please rank the following skills according to the level you believe you have improved/enhanced each this academic year.



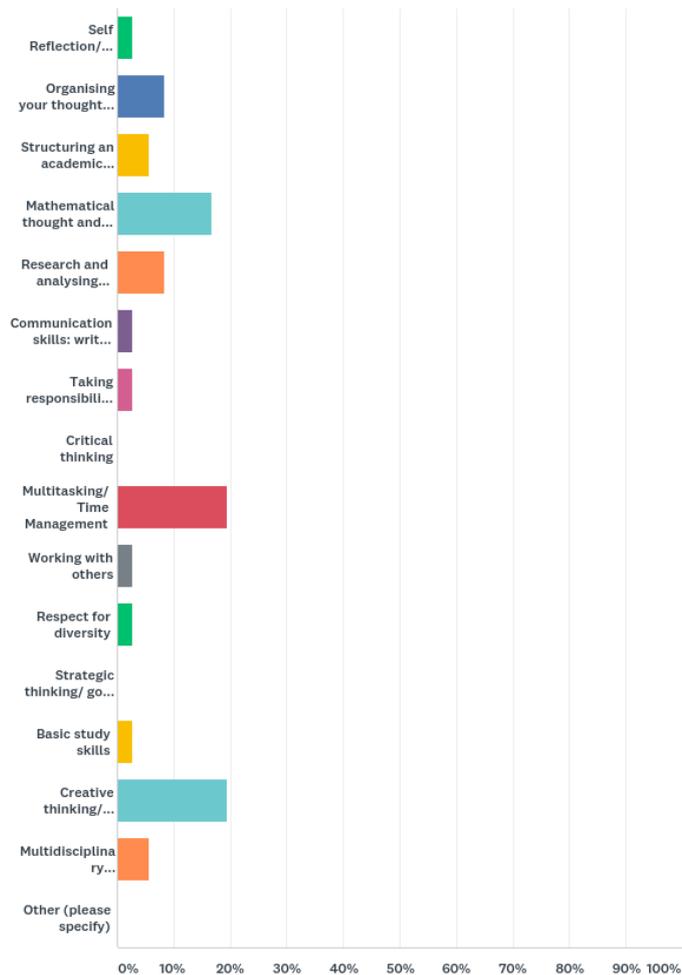
Flexibility was highly limited due to inability to plan seminars in advance, due to not knowing typical semesters classes are available or classes that are needed being full.

Q3 In which areas do you feel you have made the most progress? Please choose as many as apply to you.



Taking responsibility/time management, multidisciplinary understanding, strategic thinking (can't select more than one)

#### Q4 In which areas do you feel you need the most work?



I found that the First year was not as challenging as I expected and should be intensified a bit more.



I have thoroughly enjoyed my first year at Richmond, and am glad that I transferred here. I would highly recommend Richmond to any prospective students, either those here in the UK or those from overseas. The education that Richmond provides is second-to-none, and I personally believe the extra-curricular activities and Liberal Arts education make Richmond alumni much better suited to employment than many of the Russel Group universities in the UK, including the one I transferred from. All-in-all, my first year at Richmond has been a great experience, and I look forward to returning in September for my final two years on the Kensington campus.



Some challenges including communication between staff and students and between different departments, but overall very encouraging. As said, some time tabling issues, and interruption with negative website changes making certain information very difficult or impossible to find, but I enjoy the liberal arts system. More options in each section as part of other degrees would be good, especially in temporal/spatial, and in level 3 options.



There are a lot of programmes designed to help during your first year at Richmond but the level of success of these is limited to the participation of the students. There needs to be a change in the way such programmes are presented to ensure active engagement. For LEAD seminars in particular, these

can contain very useful information but most students see them as a requirement that you have to sit through rather than take part in. At the end of the day, Richmond must become a home for gifted, proactive students rather than a place for students who don't care, those who have less than 1.0 high school GPAs or 100 UCAS points. How can you expect engagement and advancement if the student body contains individuals who simply don't care?



I loved it but I need to focus better next semester!



As a transfer student, currently in my sophomore year, I have thoroughly enjoyed my first year at Richmond. The Liberal Arts education sets Richmond apart from other UK universities, and I believe it positively enhances my learning. I would highly recommend Richmond to any prospective students, from the UK or overseas. My only regret is not coming to Richmond sooner!!



Richmond has potential but if they want to keep students need to work on its facilities- from food to staff



Disappointing start to university, you are treated much like a child still in school with absences, and aid offered. I feel I have made no progress like all my other friends at British university in terms of academic independence. A lot needs to change about Richmond as it is not in anyway suited to British students who have had a sense of independence with choosing subjects at a-level and gcse and are now demanded to choose subjects I have NO interest in. The liberal arts system needs to be altered and fit more to British students if you are looking to continue to have them at the university because I would not recommend it to any British student.



FYS needs to go. It's a completely useless waste of time and energy, especially when you have enough transfer credits to not need it and are there until 8:00pm. I didn't enjoy it, I learned nothing, and could have been doing another course which would have contributed to my major instead of wasting time learning "how to take notes" and "the art of reflection". Please don't make any future first years waste their time with FYS. Also we need to make the clubs and societies a much bigger part of student life and really improve the student government which I have no idea how it works or what it does. We also need to work on setting up a student union and the relevant facilities like other UK universities



I have really enjoyed my first year here at Richmond. I feel the international environment adds to the learning, and the liberal arts education enhances your skills for entering work in a global city.

## v. Withdrawal summary Spring 2015

Respondent number	Sex	Class Status	Entry Point	Nationality
1	Female	Sophomore (31-59 credits)	Fall 2014	German
2	Male	Sophomore (31-59 credits)	Fall 2014	British
3	Female	Sophomore (31-59 credits)	Fall 2014	British
4	Female	Sophomore (31-59 credits)	Fall 2014	British
5	Male	Sophomore (31-59 credits)	Fall 2014	British
6	Male	Sophomore (31-59 credits)	Fall 2014	British
7	Male	Freshman (30 credits or fewer)	Fall 2014	Irish
8	Male	Freshman (30 credits or fewer)	Fall 2014	Romanian
9	Female	Freshman (30 credits or fewer)	Fall 2014	British

Subject of Study	FT/PT	Please tell us your main purpose for entering Richmond.
Business Management:International Business	Full time	to obtain a Bachelors degree
Political Science	Full time	to obtain a Bachelors degree
Communications: Marketing and Public Relations	Full time	to obtain a Bachelors degree
Business Management:International Business	Full time	to obtain a Bachelors degree
Performance and Theatre	Full time	To gain acting experience and get connections to the performing arts.
International Journalism and Media	Full time	No definite purpose in mind
Political Science	Full time	To take courses necessary to transfer to another university
Communications: Marketing and Public Relations	Full time	to obtain a Bachelors degree
Marketing	Full time	to get a degree

Respondent number	What is your main reason for withdrawing?
1	I would like to finish my degree in the United States.
2	Felt that I was really wasting my time and money at a Liberal Arts institution which did not at all cater to what I wanted from a university.
3	I have a part time job to support my studies and am so stressed doing both that I have become very depressed. I cannot afford to leave my job and stay at university; and my employer has offered me a full-time position. I love my job; and am grateful to Richmond University for the opportunities I have had during my time here.
4	The journey has become to far to travel; especially for early classes which I end up being extremely late for or not attending at all and it affects my studies.
5	The main reason for withdrawing is I was very ill in Fall15 semester and subsequently missed lots of classes due to hospital appointments and during this time when I was on strong medication; Keppra; and I tried to talk to my then adviser Dr. x and he was not only unhelpful; but very rude. And since then I tried to make things right and be able to carry on; but I haven't had any support with wanting a meeting with him to help things move on. So as it stands; he is the course leader for my major and will refuse to speak to me or even acknowledge my existence. I don't feel Richmond gave me adequate disability support. The other issue is that some performing arts courses have been dropped this next semester; making it very hard for me to catch up and complete my course.
6	I've found full time employment in a field I am interested in
7	I prefer Ireland to England
8	Because of economical reasons. To study a major not currently provided by Richmond.
9	I am withdrawing from this university because this isn't the right one for me. I don't want to do minors and I don't like that its a liberal arts university. I want to go straight into my degree and at this university I cant do that.

- Respondent number **What are your plans after Richmond?**
- 1 Finish my University studies at Saint Louis University.
  - 2 To re-apply to study politics at Queen Mary University of London
  - 3 Working full-time in a management-level position.
  - 4 I will be attending another University closer to my home.
- I was advised by my adviser to go to another university due to everything that's happened. So I applied to some and got into The Royal Central School of Speech And Drama on a BA in Drama And Applied Theatre.
- 5 Applied Theatre.
  - 6 To enter the real world; and experience new and exciting things which university can't offer me
  - 7 To go to university in Ireland.
  - 8 Study Dance: Urban Studies at University of East London
- I need to withdraw today and get released into clearing so that I can go to a different university where I can do my marketing course.
- 9

- Respondent number **Do you plan to re-enrol at the University in the future?**
- 1 No
  - 2 No
  - 3 No
  - 4 Undecided
  - 5 No
  - 6 Undecided
  - 7 No
  - 8 No
  - 9 Undecided

- Respondent number **What could Richmond have done to encourage you to stay at the University?**
- 1 Improvement of Student Life and expansion of the engagement of students in the university. Re-evaluation of several courses and their difficulty.
  - 2 Nothing
  - 3 Nothing; reducing the number of classes I was taking would have made me not full-time and had a negative financial impact as well.
  - 4 N/A

- Arrange a meeting with me and Dr. xx to help move us on. So I wouldn't be scared to take his classes. And if Richmond didn't withdraw essential theatre classes. I felt very uninspired as a student. The course was not challenging enough. I also felt that university was sold to me as a life changing experience where doors will be opened for you... not the case. Too much free time and going from Richmond to Ken was both tedious and time consuming. Other students were concerned more with smoking; drug taking and getting wasted most nights. I would never want to be associated with people such as this. Lack of parking for students meant it was costing me £40 a week for buses and a further £20 a week for tube. When talking to other students it appears that they don't have to pay a premium for parking on campus... but when I inquired I would have to? So rules seem to apply to some and not to others.
- 5
- 6 Self Service... a joke.
- 7 nothing really
- 8 Become a public University that can be fully covered by SFE
- 9 Nothing. Maybe next time be clear on emails that students receive and what to do when enrolling into this university.

**Please give us any more information regarding your student experience at the University that is relevant to your withdrawal.**

Respondent number

- 1 Being a University level institution I expected courses in general to be more challenging; regardless of their class level. I also prefer being in a bigger institution.
- 2 N/A
- 3 There was a lot of responsibility and stress regarding exams; essays and in-class assignments. I could not keep on top of these and was never going to be able to. I love that Richmond has all of these ways assessment methods; as it helps you keep on track of your learning and makes sure you get out what you put into the degree. I wasn't able to put the time in; and though I may have been able to continue passing classes I would not have got from the degree what I wanted; and I would have been

extremely stressed and adversely affected my health.

- 4 N/A  
I think Richmond has many benefits; including accommodation throughout the whole course. But there is a big lack of disability help and matters of bullying or assault that is not taken seriously enough. Also I don't believe it's fair that I have to withdraw because my course leader doesn't like me and won't talk to me; but that is the case.
- 5 I became uninterested in a career that had previously interested me.
- 6
- 7 /
- 8 Strictly economical.  
  
I didn't enjoy the lessons that I attended as it's not something that I wanted to do.
- 9

## vi. National Student Survey Comments on Liberal Arts

Was Richmond's Liberal Arts approach relevant or useful to you in your studies at Richmond or in preparing you for life after Richmond, and why do you say that?

In short, yes. The liberal arts design has allowed me to interrogate many academic disciplines and draw interesting cross-disciplinary conclusions. However, the Transitions: London Calling classes were not particularly helpful. The staff resources currently allocated to these Transitions classes should be alternatively given to current industry professionals who come into classes providing networking and internship prospects. This helps to promote an overall balance between theoretical and practical education in the University.

Honestly, I have no idea. Most of the courses were theory based which helps with knowledge, but not so much practicality and I feel as if I've left university not knowing where in the world I belong.

It was handy to learn other skills, which are deemed appropriate.

I think that Richmond's organisation needs to be revised as soon as possible because there are many things that don't work. The approach didn't help me at all and I feel it was just going against us students. Final exams need to be done in a different way if we still have deadlines until 3 days before the exams start. It's unacceptable.

I definitely feel that the liberal arts approach gave me a general platform to build from - rather than focusing on only my major the second I entered Richmond, I gained useful skills to help me with my career from the transitions course while other courses helped me expand the way I think.

I chose Richmond for the liberal arts approach; it is helpful that I am able to do such a wide variety of classes.

Yes, as being able to learn about topics outside my psychology field of interest has diversified my work. The electives have allowed me to have more knowledge in other courses, which I would not have usually chosen to do.

Yes, it was useful, the courses are extremely practical demonstrating how and what the real world is and feels like.

No as most lectures were relevant to a wide range of different majors. Also, the lectures of which I had taken on did not seem relevant to my degree.

It gave me the possibility of taking an Environmental Minor.

The liberal arts approach in the first year was to an extent a waste of time. London Calling courses (of which there were 2) added no value to my degree. Research and writing courses (of which there were also 2) was just a basic version of Research Methods and could have been without. Overall, they are easy courses; so you can get settled and enjoy your first year, but if you have come to learn and want to get a good degree the first year feels like almost a complete waste of time.

Yes, a vast range of different subjects helped me to get different views.

Not relevant for business major.

Studying journalism - it is useful to have studied a plethora of courses to accompany the 'jack-of-all-trades' with journalism. This was particularly useful for learning a little, about a lot.

It is okay, but not something desperately important.

Yes, because on average, most of the courses are very practical and the knowledge learned can be easily translated into the real world.

Liberal Arts don't aid at all in career but allow for a baseline of general knowledge and intelligence to be achieved.

It was helpful because it helped to improve my communications skills. As a performer, I find it really helpful.

It did allow a great deal of possibilities for extra studies, and I do believe a relatively rounded understand of many subjects is important. However, I already had a rounded knowledge of most of these things, when I started at Richmond, so it was not particularly applicable to me specifically.

Yes 100%, because I had a great mixture of courses that helped broaden my interests and make me feel like I know a lot about different disciplines.

The extra courses made to be taken by students in order to qualify for a Liberal Arts degree have been extremely useless; however, this is more so due to the personal choices of the University rather than to requirement. In the past, professors have revealed that much more engaging and fun courses had been offered and have repeatedly asked to have them returned. As of yet, no changes have been made.

Yes, it is definitely helpful in a world where interdisciplinary, adaptability, and confidence are necessary and deeply valued.

I do not know if the approach was relevant or not because I did not know about it.

Yes, as we are able to get a well-rounded education that ensures we can tackle with our majors and any challenges we face in the future. I have developed better communication and presentation skills, thanks to the liberal arts degree.

No never had to experience the Liberal Arts approach.

Neither agree or disagree.

It gave me the opportunity to explore different subjects not necessarily relevant for my major but it definitely didn't prepare me for life after uni.

I personally would disagree, most of the liberal arts course that are offered seemed very redundant to my degree. Therefore, I don't believe that they helped me in any way throughout my time at Richmond. Of course, a couple courses, in particular research and writing were helpful but I don't believe the likes of creative expression and the community service type course were helpful at all. If anything, they slowed the process of graduation for many students.

It was relevant and useful to me especially since I came from a Liberal Arts background. The Liberal Arts curriculum gave me a wider perspective on how I could tie in the concepts I learned to my degree courses. Since I came from a liberal arts background, it was also easier to adjust to university life and university workload.

Liberal arts curriculum is very useful to learn about different subjects; it can help understanding what you really like and what you would like your career to be focused on.

Yes, because it gave me a year to find my feet and get familiar with my surroundings before taking more difficult degree specific classes.

Partly yes, but too many useless and basic classes in the first year and a half. Way too many! Also, there was nothing to study in the first year and it was a waste of time, but then it got better. Last two years were actually university!

Yes, it was useful because I was a previous US student that was accustomed to this approach and I find it very useful.

No, irrelevant for Financial Economics.

I think that the opportunity to study subjects outside a chosen main area of interest or study (major and elective requirements) is incredibly beneficial. It gives you the opportunity to explore or discover other interests that may inspire a change of course or an area of interest to pursue alongside our studies or after we graduate. My professors have offered an incredibly amount of guidance regarding paths to take after we finish our degrees in the chosen field.

It helped me realise how preparing in advance is the best thing you can do. Psychology has offered me a complete view of the world especially having the greatest teachers.

Richmond's approach was relevant in most part, but it is a very broad approach, which would certainly gain in being a bit more focus on essential topics sometimes.

It provides for a good foundation to go into just about anything.

Yes, I believe it was as these courses helped me express my other interests as well as make me engage with other students.

Richmond is truly liberal, the teachings, the people, its vibrant culture, the clubs and societies; everything seems in harmony with one another. It is the type of university that makes me feel important as an individual and as a member of society, and that is what I aim to be after I graduate from it. It has made me a true intellect and a more open-minded person, the diversity in Richmond taught me that there is always different perspectives, and more importantly, that they should all be equally respected. It encourages a friendly non-hostile environment which is very important for personal growth. The Liberal arts approach taught me to ask questions and think critically. I think Richmond is one of the best universities to combine theory with practice, its politics courses don't just teach you about the parliament, they take you there. One of the most important things I learned was if we don't think highly of ourselves then how do we expect other people to do so? And in that sense, Richmond has taught me how to be a true ambassador not just in politics but also in my personal life. Richmond constantly holds career workshops, networking events, and intriguing intellectual talks to prepare students for the workplace, and absolutely everyone is included and encouraged to become a part of them. The internship opportunities that it offers are extremely relevant and important. I think that what I love most about Richmond is the fact that you enter it wanting to graduate with one degree, but you end up learning about everything. The electives that it offers allow you to become an expert in politics, psychology, philosophy, and business all at once, and the library facilities never fail to deliver to the highest expectations.