

Liberal Arts in Neoliberal Times

Pedro Erber
School of International Liberal Arts,
Waseda University

Abstract

This paper examines the transformation of liberal arts education under neoliberalism, focusing on the ideological shift that has redefined the purpose of higher education in economic terms. The paper traces the increasing instrumentalization of education through the lens of “human resources” and “human capital” theory. Drawing on the works of Gary Becker and Friedrich Hayek, it explores how neoliberal thought has reshaped not only educational institutions but also the very conception of knowledge and subjectivity. The argument highlights the paradox at the heart of neoliberal education policies: while higher education is framed as an investment in human capital, neoliberal economic theory simultaneously asserts the fundamental unpredictability of market demands and the limits of knowledge itself. The paper concludes by reflecting on the potential for intellectual freedom within this framework, reclaiming the liberal arts as a domain of autonomous inquiry beyond immediate economic utility.

Keywords: neoliberalism, liberal arts education, human capital, human resources, higher education policy, knowledge and ignorance, Friedrich Hayek, market rationality

Academics in general do not pay much attention to the mission statements of their institutions. Understandably so, as such official declarations often misrepresent or diverge significantly from the realities of academic life. Nonetheless, when reflecting on the relationship between neoliberalism and the liberal arts, I became curious about how my own department defines its mission as part of a school of liberal studies in a Japanese university. What I discovered turned out to be more closely connected to this topic than I initially anticipated.

My department's homepage features an electronic pamphlet advertising its program, outlining its structure, and emphasizing its distinctive qualities. The brochure, which is also available in print, objects to "conventional academic approaches," which it describes as inadequate for addressing "today's increasingly complex society." In contrast to these approaches, the pamphlet claims that students in our school will learn "through dialogue" to address such complexities from fresh perspectives and thereby "open up the future by themselves."

Albeit rather vague, in keeping with the nature of institutional marketing materials, the statement contains a clear nod to fashionable conceptions of student-led education and the demise of professorial authority. But what truly captured my attention was the concluding sentence, which

reads: "We will nurture human resources who are capable of taking on such a role [of opening up the future]." This description seemed oddly disconnected from the day-to-day reality of our work and from the way I—and most of my colleagues, I assume—perceive our roles as educators. I do not think that any of us would describe our mission as being centered on "nurturing human resources." More importantly, the mention of "human resources" in an official statement on the meaning of liberal studies immediately evoked a distinct sense of *déjà vu*.

Nurturing Human Resources

In 2015, the Republican governor of the State of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, proposed a \$300 million reduction to the state's higher education budget. As part of this initiative, Walker unilaterally revised the University of Wisconsin's mission statement, removing a section that articulated the university's purpose as "seeking truth" and "serving society." In its place, he proposed a new objective: "to develop human resources to meet the state's workforce needs." This incident has often been cited as a paradigmatic example of the neoliberal encroachment on higher education. The backlash to Walker's revisions was so significant that he ultimately rescinded