

Education is soul deep

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Article

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HARRY Lewis, a professor and long-time dean of Harvard College at Harvard University, wrote an analysis of the university last year.

On reading his book, *Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education*, one gets the impression that something is amiss in undergraduate education at the university.

Lewis implies that the university, indeed others in the US, too, is losing its "soul" as it becomes more and more consumer-driven. Increasingly, universities seem to cater to students' desires, instead of shaping their character as citizens.

Arguably, academic achievement alone is not sufficient to imbue good citizenship. Thus, it is alleged that there is a decline in American society because its elite universities — on which so much of the future depends—have forgotten about education.

Although students are rigorously taught, they are not any wiser. While they pass exams with flying colours, it is tailored towards short-term market needs and not for a life-time. The hallmark of a good education now seems to be one that gives instant employment. It is no longer about values and ideals.



But Harvard seems ready to reclaim its lost "soul". Last week, its Faculty of Arts and Sciences approved a proposed curricula overhaul.

A four-year revision process, which started under the shortlived leadership of Lawrence Summers, has now come full circle.

The last revision was in 1978. It led to the introduction of the concept of "Core Curriculum" which focused more on ways of thinking, relative to content.

Currently, the focus is on shading some light on how subjects—what are normally regarded as "non-marketable" — such as philosophy and art history are featured in the new curricula.

It may well be true that Harvard would not return to the days of General Education in a Free Society, based on the curricula reforms by the Harvard Committee on General Education of 1945.

The committee had proposed a combination of required core and elective courses. The worry then was that civilisation itself might be jeopardised if such an approach was not taken.

Until today, most general education curricula emphasise these elements. As one handbook puts it, it is "designed to ensure breadth of knowledge and to promote intellectual inquiry" (Peer Review, Fall 2004).

But as new sets of priorities emerge, another revision is timely. As Warren Bennis and Hallum Movius write in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (March 17, 2006), universities have undergone "a sea change that makes it among the most difficult organisations in the world to lead". The rapid rise of science and technology, individual mobility and entrepreneurship are among the many that caused the difference.

The stage is set for a major overhaul of general education for undergraduates in nearly 30 years. It replaces the Core Programme established in the late 1970s because the disciplines have shifted.

As such, the new revision should prepare students to "understand themselves as products of — and participants

in — traditions of art, ideas and values".

It is also intended for civic engagement and "to develop students' understanding of the ethical dimensions of what they say and do".

Interim president Derek Bok, who oversaw the last curricula overhaul in the 1970s, regards it as "a comprehensive effort to improve quality of undergraduate education than anything that has happened in the history of this university".

He praised the current review saying: "Students will be more motivated to learn if they see a connection with the kind of problems, issues and questions they will encounter in later life."

Now that Harvard has joined the ranks of many leading universities that have already made similar changes, including Yale, Rutgers and the universities of Pennsylvania and Texas, it serves as a powerful signal to others that changes are inevitable.

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