

Why All Students Should Take a New Foundation Year in Human Awareness

Brief notes for the New Economics Foundation

Roman Krznic

June 2007



The School of Athens, Raphael

The long view: the main objectives of education throughout Western history

- Ancient Greece: to become a generalist, with understanding of all realms of human knowledge
- Medieval Europe: to gain expertise in warfare and rhetoric
- Renaissance: to become a generalist, as in Ancient Greece
- 16th-18th centuries: to acquire religious knowledge and belief
- 19th century: to acquire basic literacy and numeracy that help contribute towards national economic development and individual moral improvement
- 20th century: to develop specialist knowledge and skills
- 21st century: to acquire technological competence

Where we are today, with the focus on technological competence combined with extremely high degrees of specialisation, is too limited.

What is missing from contemporary higher education?

- The Art of Living
- Generalist Thinking
- Social Well-being and Empathy
- Change Studies
- Ecological Understanding

The solution: a new Foundation Year in Human Awareness, a requirement in all higher education institutions

Throughout the United States, first year college undergraduates are usually required to follow a broad-based, multidisciplinary curriculum of 'liberal' education - an idea pioneered around a century ago at the University of Chicago. Similarly, art students in the UK do a 'foundation course' of preliminary study designed to broaden their horizons. I believe British colleges and universities need a new Foundation Year in Human Awareness, which will provide a basis for later specialist and technological learning. It should be a requirement for all first year students in higher education and should have five component courses:

The Art of Living

This course covers what really matters to individuals in their lives and futures, their emotional needs and personal well-being. The core topics are precisely those that are not traditional subjects of study but have been of concern to human beings throughout history and across cultures. These topics include: love, ambition, suffering and loneliness, time, freedom, purpose, creativity, fear, death, work, being good, variety and simplicity, and sensation.

Generalist Thinking

Students learn about the underlying assumptions and approaches of many disciplines and professions, including those in which there have been recent rapid advances in knowledge. The purpose is to discover how lawyers, scientists, managers or poets think and create. Areas of study include: law, literature, engineering, art, religion, neuroscience and genetics, business, linguistics, social studies, artificial intelligence, economics and development, medicine, and music.

Social Well-being and Empathy

An opportunity to learn to see the world from the perspective of others. Students take part in workshops that enhance their intercultural understanding, develop their empathy, and improve their understanding of community cohesion and social well-being. This course also includes practical, experiential elements of volunteering in local community organisations or bodies involved in international issues such as development, human rights and peace-building.

Change Studies

How change happens is a central component of almost every academic discipline yet there is no single subject that brings together the different ways of thinking about change, and what has been learned about change and continuity throughout history. Change Studies provides an overview of approaches to explain change and continuity, drawing on disciplines such as psychology, anthropology and international relations, and taking into account new theories such as tipping points. This course provides the broad thinking required to help us face the enormous challenges confronting our societies and planet.

Ecological Understanding

Climate change is the new context in which all individuals, societies and living organisms must survive. This course examines the origins of the climate crisis, the problem of reduced planetary biodiversity, the science and sociology of global warming, debates about the nature and extent of climate change, the history of ecological movements, strategies for mitigation and adaptation, and the role of new technologies.

Roman Krznanic is an independent consultant who specializes in creative thinking about education and social change, with a particular focus on the role of empathy. He has degrees in the social sciences from the universities of Oxford, London and Essex, where he obtained his Ph.D. in political sociology. He can be contacted through his website, www.romankrznanic.com.