

# **Bologna Process Beyond 2020: Fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area**

## **Liberal Arts Education, Student-Centered Learning and the Art of Reflective Judgment**

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**Abstract:** One of the most important skills that university students need to develop to function in tomorrow's society is the ability to make reflective judgments. This ability to make decisions in the absence of determinate and authoritative criteria will form the enduring basis of careers and meaningful lives in a world in which artificial intelligence and global competition are becoming ever more present. Fostering this ability requires a student-centered approach to higher education, in which students take control of both what they study and how they study it, so that they can cultivate their own agency. Liberal arts programs, as they have appeared in Europe since the Bologna process started, can provide examples of how this approach can be realized in the context of the modern university.

**Keywords:** Student-Centered Education; Reflective Judgment; 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills; Liberal Arts

The human condition is making choices and judgments. We are confronted with problems, examine them, and then decide what to think and what to do. We do this every day in our work, but also as citizens and individuals. How well we make those choices and judgments determines the quality of our communities and our lives. Since all education should prepare students to live well, both as individuals and in societies, it follows that one thing education, including higher education, should teach students is how to make choices and judgments in a good way.

This means that, in order to determine how higher education should be shaped, one must consider how choices and judgments are made, and what it means to make them well. While there are many ways of making judgments, two important mechanisms are determinate judgment and reflective judgment.

### *Determinate and Reflective Judgment*

Determinate judgment is the judgment of experts. It solves problems by asking what a particular set of rules, or system of thought, says about the issue under consideration. The quintessential example of this is the work of judges in a criminal law system. Judges apply the law, by determining what crime a defendant has committed, following the definitions of various crimes established in the criminal code. Once they have determined this, they follow the rules set out by the law concerning what the appropriate penalty for that crime would be. However, this kind of judgment happens in many other contexts as well; whenever problems are solved by the application of existing rules or standards determinate judgments are made.

Reflective judgments, on the other hand, are not made by asking what the rules say about a particular case, but rather by asking which of many rules that one could apply to a given situation should be used. There are many problems in which different rules could be used, and there is no

agreement as to which one should be applied. Each set of rules gives a different solution, and these are better in some ways but worse in others. Some people benefit more from one answer than others do, and different groups are disadvantaged by different solutions to different extents. Hence it is of no use to merely be able to determine what a certain rule says about a problem, as the question whether that rule is the one to use is precisely what is at stake.

### *The Importance of Reflective Judgment*

Being able to solve such so-called complex or wicked problems through reflective judgment will be particularly important in the future. For one thing, the major challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are problems that cannot be resolved simply by the application of existing rules or systems of thought. These include preventing environmental change, dealing with social inequality, or pacifying long-standing international conflicts.

Moreover, being able to make reflective judgments well will be of particular economic importance in the context of the rise of artificial intelligence. Computers are designed to apply algorithms to a wide variety of cases based on large amounts of data, and hence they are very capable of making determinate judgments. As a result, many occupations that primarily consist of making determinate judgments will cease to exist, because this work will be taken over by computers. However, occupations which consist largely of making reflective judgments cannot be automated because computers are fundamentally incapable of making these kinds of judgments. After all, computers can merely execute pre-determined programs and carry out instructions that human beings have issued. These will be the jobs of the future.

One might also add that being able to make reflective judgments is an important aspect of being a citizen in a democratic society. The idea of democracy is that citizens consider different solutions to, or at least different visions about, social problems, and then decide what they feel is the best solution. All these perspectives are then exchanged and aggregated, through debate and voting, to come to some collective decision. This is a process of reflective judgment. Democracy cannot survive if all citizens do is ask what an external system of rules says about a social issue and act accordingly. That may be appropriate in an authoritarian regime, but a true democracy requires people to make up their own minds.

However, despite the importance of teaching students how to make reflective judgments, much of higher education is fundamentally concerned with teaching students how to make determinate judgments. Especially in teacher-centered pedagogies, the model seems to be that teachers are the experts, who know what the rules say and how one can classify cases into the categories they create to determine what those rules say about them. The goal of education seems to be to transfer this knowledge to students, so that they learn what the experts already know. Traditional lectures make perfect sense as a didactical tool in this vision, because they are an efficient way of conveying this kind of knowledge. Similarly, it is appropriate to not give students the possibility of composing their own curriculum. Rather, teachers are best placed to decide on the correct sequence and content of instruction. When it comes to assessment, the goal is to determine how well students have internalized the rules and can apply them to the kinds of problems they are likely to encounter. This can be tested through multiple-choice exams or closed questions, which pose a problem and ask what the correct solution is. While this is, in some ways, a caricature of much higher education and many universities have abandoned this model, it is exemplary of a teacher-centered approach to education.

This focus on teaching determinate judgment through a teacher-centered model of education, which still seems to be present in much of European higher education, is ill-suited for teaching students how to make reflective judgments. As this will become increasingly important in the future, a different

approach is required. This approach must be much more student-centered, because this is a much better way of learning how to make such judgments. To see this, one must consider how one makes reflective judgments.

### *Making Reflective Judgments through Student-Centered Education*

By its very nature, making reflective judgments cannot be understood as a mechanical process. Nevertheless, one can identify certain phases. Firstly, one must consider what rules or systems of thought can be applied to a particular problem. This requires one to apply different perspectives to it. For this reason, determinate judgement still has a place in making reflective judgments. However, one must go further, initially by considering the effects of each of the possible solutions on different aspects of the situation and on different groups of people. This gives one a sense of the different consequences one must accept if one chooses a particular solution, and the trade-offs involved. Then, and this is the most difficult part, one has to decide what to do. In doing so, one must formulate reasons that one finds persuasive, and that one can explain to those affected. That means that reflective judgment is ultimately a matter of values. Indeed, that is why computers are fundamentally incapable of making reflective judgments; they have no values except for the ones those who program them give them.

Education can help students learn how to do this in a number of ways. In order to do so, it must expose students to different disciplines and ways of looking at problems. It must also make them aware of how different interventions affect different groups in society. But above all, it must help students discover their values, and teach them how to articulate and communicate those values to others. The best way of doing this is to let them deal with complex or wicked problems during their education, providing them with the disciplinary resources they need to consider what different ways of looking at various problems exist, but also giving them an opportunity to discover their values. For while one can only make reflective judgments based on one's values, one discovers one's values by making reflective judgments. One must make a decision and reflect on why one feels that is an appropriate conclusion, considering what values might animate that conclusion and what that says about what one finds important. That makes learning how to make reflective judgment a matter of experience, but also of self-discovery.

These goals cannot be accomplished through a teacher-centered approach to education; a student-centered approach is better suited to allowing students to develop the ability to make reflective judgments. The central idea behind such an approach is that students should have the freedom to ask and answer complex questions, and thereby learn how to apply different systems of thought to different problems, thus developing a value system that will enable them to deal with these kinds of problems. This means that students should have ownership of what they study and how they study it, but should also be invited to develop their own perspective on what they study. This is an abstract ideal. However, a recent development in European higher education can provide a model of how this educational ideal can be realized.

### *Liberal Arts Education and the Art of Reflective Judgment*

Since the start of the Bologna process, Europe has seen the introduction of a significant number of liberal arts programs. By some counts, there are over 80 programs of this type, mainly in the Netherlands and the UK, but also in a range of other countries. These programs typically cater to students in the first cycle of their higher education and, while they differ in a number of respects, they usually share a number of features. These features all contribute to a student-centered model of higher education, which fosters students' ability to make reflective judgments.

Firstly, they offer an interdisciplinary curriculum, in which students are exposed to a range of different disciplines. In most cases, students are given considerable freedom of choice in designing

their course of studies, either through an open curriculum or through a system of majors and minors. Students are expected to both develop themselves broadly and to develop expertise in a particular combination of disciplines or topical issues. This T-shaped curriculum ensures that students learn to see what each discipline can contribute to understanding particular problems. Every academic discipline is a particular system of thought, and it looks at questions in a specific way. Studying only one discipline might make sense for learning determinate judgment, but it is insufficient to learn how to make reflective judgments. Moreover, allowing students to design their own curriculum and giving them freedom in what they study requires them to consider, more carefully than most students do, what subjects they feel they need for their further development. This is an example of those complex or wicked problems that require reflective judgment. Forcing student to think about it gives them an opportunity to practice this kind of decision making and come to a self-understanding of their values and goals.

Secondly, liberal arts programs typically have an active pedagogy. They mostly shun large-scale lectures in favor of small-scale tutorials or seminars, in which students take a much more active role. In such formats, students are asked to pursue questions, consider scientific sources, weigh evidence and draw conclusions concerning the subjects they study. This makes these pedagogical formats conversations between students, in which they are expected to present their perspective on the material and questions under consideration, exchange their perspectives with others, weigh those perspectives and come to well-justified conclusions. Teachers do not act as fonts of knowledge, but play much more of a coaching role, and engage in a Socratic dialogue with the goal of challenging students to clarify their own thinking and face the complex problems their studies raise.

Moreover, many liberal arts programs seek to enroll a diverse range of students. They often promote themselves as international communities, consisting of students from many different countries. These programs also try to attract students from all kinds of social and economic backgrounds, through outreach activities and scholarships. They do so because they believe that this creates a better educational environment. Students learn as much from each other as they do from their teachers, and a diverse student body exposes them to many different viewpoints. This is especially important in the context of the active pedagogy discussed above. In a lecture-based education system, it does not matter where students come from, as they are passive consumers of education. However, if education is to be an active process in which different sides of issues and questions are explored, it helps to have a diverse student body. Students from different backgrounds will bring different perspectives and insights to the table, which all reveal something about the issues under consideration.

All of this contributes to students' ability to make reflective judgments. This type of pedagogical approach forces them to consider different perspectives on problems, and makes students realize the effects of different decisions on different people. These active pedagogies require students to listen to the contributions their peers make, and present their own opinions to others. The former asks them to understand the perspectives of a range of other participants, ask clarifying questions, and consider why they came to the conclusions that they did, giving students a sense of the effects of various answers and solutions to problems on others. Moreover, they must present their own solutions in such a way that others can understand and scrutinize them. This requires them to reflect on and articulate their own values, as is required for making reflective judgments.

Thirdly, liberal arts programs assess students in a much more process-oriented way. They typically prefer not to rely on closed questions and multiple-choice exams. Rather, they ask students to write essays, give presentations and do their own, independent research. Students usually receive extensive feedback, and are welcome to engage in further discussions concerning their work with their teachers. This approach to assessment is only logical. While one can assess the extent to which one is

able to make determinate judgments correctly by posing a problem and looking at the answer students provide, the quality of reflective judgment cannot be measured in this way. How well one makes such a judgment depends on the number of perspectives one has considered, how carefully one has taken the consequences of different answers into account, and how clearly and consistently one has articulated the reasons and values that led to the conclusion one has reached. That makes assessing reflective judgment a matter of assessing a process, and that requires one to examine how that process unfolded. Closed questions and multiple-choice exams do not allow for this. However, essays, presentations and the like, give teachers a much better insight into how students come to their conclusions.

### *Conclusion*

For all its limitations, the idea that education is only real if it involves experts transferring knowledge and teaching students how to apply rules or systems of thought to particular cases is persistent. It still informs a lot of thinking about higher education, if only implicitly. However, the increasing need for individuals who can make reflective judgments will require that the teacher-centered approach that a focus on determinate judgment often generates be replaced by a more student-centered way of learning. Liberal arts programs can provide examples of how this can be done. While they remain a niche in the European higher education landscape, many of their features, such as freedom of choice, more active pedagogies, and more process-oriented forms of assessment, can be implemented in a wide range of contexts. In this way, European higher education can make good on the promise of the Bologna process: to create an education area that prepares future generations for realizing a society that does justice to a fundamental aspect of the human condition, i.e. choosing well.