**[Liberal arts taboo](https://www.dawn.com/news/1716132/liberal-arts-taboo)**

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PROF Alexander Key was spot on when he suggested in his talk at a private university in Karachi that students should be offered more options in the field of liberal arts to teach them to think in multiple ways about the world.

It may be added that choices are important not only in liberal arts to broaden the thinking of the youth. Even students studying medicine, commerce, engineering, architecture, etc should be given exposure to the liberal arts.

A few decades ago, this was unthinkable in Pakistan. The various disciplines were tightly segregated. Each group concentrated on its own subjects. In the decades of the 1950s and 1960s, liberal arts (termed arts/humanities here) constituted the largest faculty in all universities and received as much respect as the others.

It was only when education became a profitable activity in Pakistan that trends changed. Liberal arts began to be treated with contempt. Because until recently the public sector was the policymaker, it could set the trend by establishing institutions to teach what the government deemed important. There came a time when the liberal arts went totally out of fashion.

Conformism is the main tenet of our education system.

I checked with the Board of Intermediate Education, Karachi, for data of candidates appearing in their Intermediate examination in 2018. While 60,000 candidates appeared in the science group and 39,000 in commerce, the arts group had only 14,000 candidates.

Supporters of the liberal arts have shown concern at the devaluation of these subjects. In 1999, the Council of Social Sciences was established at the initiative of Dr Inayatullah, an economist and sociologist. The aim was to provide a common platform to scholars in these disciplines. Today, the liberal arts have made a comeback thanks to private universities. Now even medical and business studies students are given exposure to some liberal arts subjects at private institutions.

This does not mean that the liberal arts have been popularised. The fact is that the private universities that offer a good education in the liberal arts are beyond the reach of the common man as their fees are unaffordable for families of modest means. Public-sector universities have to broaden their outlook more and consider seriously what Dr Key has suggested. Even in liberal arts universities, there is more room to broaden choices. For instance, comparative literature is now being taught in many universities but to the best of my knowledge, no institution in Pakistan teaches comparative religion that would foster greater interfaith harmony in the country.

The point to ponder is, why is there an overt aversion to the liberal arts generally. It begins at the top where policies are made and then filters down to the grassroots. The fact of the matter is that the liberal arts encourage critical thinking and when taught as they should be — underpinned by interactive discourse — they prompt a student to question and challenge conventional beliefs.

Which government in Pakistan has been comfortable with ideas that are non-conformist? Have litterateurs like Faiz and Habib Jalib and scholars like Mubarak Ali ever been honoured by the establishment? Liberal arts will therefore not be encouraged in Pakistan’s public-sector universities. The powers that be feel threatened and insecure. Hence their preference for unquestioning acquiescence to whatever is handed down to the students as the final truth. It is unthinkable that the authorities would encourage freedom of expression of any kind in the classrooms.

Conformism is the central principle of our education system. This approach vis-à-vis the liberal arts has undermined education and, along with it, society in Pakistan. People are generally intolerant of the opinions of others who are not like-minded. At the root of this problem is the failure of our school education. Policymakers and practitioners have no understanding whatsoever of the child and her emotional security needs. Neither is respect shown to her natural inclination and inner strength that help her explore and discover knowledge and her own potential.

Take the aims spelt out in all our education policies. Invariably, they state their goal to be to train manpower resources equipped with the knowledge of technology for the benefit of the country. In other words, children are forced to study how and what and when that has been decided by a bunch of adults ignorant of the needs of a child. These decision-makers will be horrified by the suggestion to give choices to the child.

Prof Key displays a remarkable understanding of the youth when he says that choices make students happy and they do better when they do what interests them. This principle holds true for the child as well. It should be applied from the start of the child’s school education. But no academic stands up and speaks for the child or the reform of the school system to align it with the needs and interests of the child.

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