

**BLENDING LIBERAL STUDIES WITH BUSINESS EDUCATION**

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**ABSTRACT**

The ability shown by Business schools to adapt and change in accordance with the evolving needs of stakeholders is truly exceptional. They have been open to criticism and have, through multiple mechanisms, sought to address shortcomings. Blending Liberal Studies with Business Education is the need of the future. Liberal studies covers Social Science, Natural Science, Humanities, and Arts. This helps students to widen their scope of knowledge and choose careers in various and diverse fields. Liberal studies courses are holistic and designed to cover various fields. They help students to learn skill transferability, curiosity, and employability. Students are allowed to create a combination that suits best to their interests and career goals. This comprehensive and flexible approach ensures that every student learns how to think critically and communicate effectively. Besides, it helps students build important skills such as analytical skills, problem-solving skills, social skills etc.

*Key words – Liberal studies, human skills, creative thinking, multi-disciplinary, ethics*

**INTRODUCTION**

Management thinkers have questioned the value of business schools and have leveled a number of criticisms against them since the 70s. Most of the criticisms have come from insiders like Henry Mintzberg (McGill), Warren Bennis (Southern California), James O’Toole (Denver), Nitin Nohria and Rakesh Khurana (Harvard), and Joel Podolny (Apple University), which is a testimony to the capacity of business schools to introspect and change. They have shown a significant ability to adapt, change and improve the curricula and delivery of their programmes.

Most B schools now have a course on Business Ethics, and electives on Corporate Social Responsibility and Sustainability. They have centres that promote research, teaching and industry and outreach on Sustainability. Students are exerting pressure for more content on these topics and the sensitivity towards ethics and environmental issues is far better than before. Students nowadays are deeply interested in topics such as Impact Investing, Social Entrepreneurship and the 3P approach (people, planet and profits) to management. In fact, many students give up lucrative corporate jobs to work in the social sector. The B school entrepreneurship courses are designed to help entrepreneurs navigate the start-up phase, whereas the other courses provide them with frameworks to think systematically about achieving sustainability. They have shown openness to criticism and have, through multiple mechanisms, sought to address their shortcomings. It is not a coincidence that the MBA degree is the most widely offered post graduation qualification in the world and that millions of MBA graduates have enjoyed successful careers as corporate executives and entrepreneurs.

As the participants’ age and work experience increases, the content and delivery of the programmes shift from technical to more managerial. Studying while working has the benefit of allowing participants to continuously relate their classroom learning to their workplaces. MBA is no longer a single degree with one curriculum and method of delivery; it has evolved over time into multiple modalities for participants with different experience profiles. Indian B schools need to support rigorous research, the kind that addresses questions that are of relevance to organizations, their stakeholders and to their context. Many schools now have two tracks – research and practice – in order to have practice faculty engage with practitioners. The themes of the annual Academy of Management conference reflect this change: Creating Actionable knowledge (2004), knowledge, action and the

public concern (2006), and Bringing the Manager Back in Management (2021). B-schools have partially addressed the problem, but more is expected.

**Including Liberal studies in Business Education**

There are many subjects that fall within the wide scope of liberal studies. Liberal studies is interdisciplinary, and covers topics related to humanities, social, natural and formal sciences. Like ‘Experiential Learning,’ this is another education norm. It is multi-disciplinary having broad-spectrum approach and includes skill development and knowledge in various domains and subjects. This helps widen knowledge and students can make careers in diverse fields. Liberal studies cover several disciplines, helping students to learn skill transferability, curiosity, and employability. The comprehensive and flexible approach ensures that every student learns how to think critically and communicate effectively. This helps students build skills that have vast applicability such as research skills, analytical skills, problem-solving skills, oral skills, and writing skills. Students are permitted to combine subjects of their interest that might have otherwise been considered ‘academically incompatible.’ One can experiment with the possible combinations without any limitations. While students can pick Business Studies as their Major, their Minor can be a subject from an entirely different study vertical, say Anthropology. This provides students with an edge over others at their workplace. Furthermore, it widens the range of the opportunities to them.

Liberal Studies gives students many skills which are enviable, a few of which are analytical, evaluative, critical and creative thinking skills, Effective oral and written communication skills, Problem-solving and pattern intelligence skills, Ability to learn and synthesize new ideas, Experience in quantitative and qualitative data analysis, Critical and reflective reading skills, Numerical skills, Effective research skills, Organization and time-management skills, Information literacy skills, Ability to adapt easily to situations, Ethical decision-making skills, Ability to pose meaningful questions, Ability to work in a team, self-confidence and self-understanding, Ability to be sensitive to others and be tolerant of cultural differences, Foreign language skills and cross-cultural knowledge etc.

**1. BLENDING LIBERAL STUDIES**

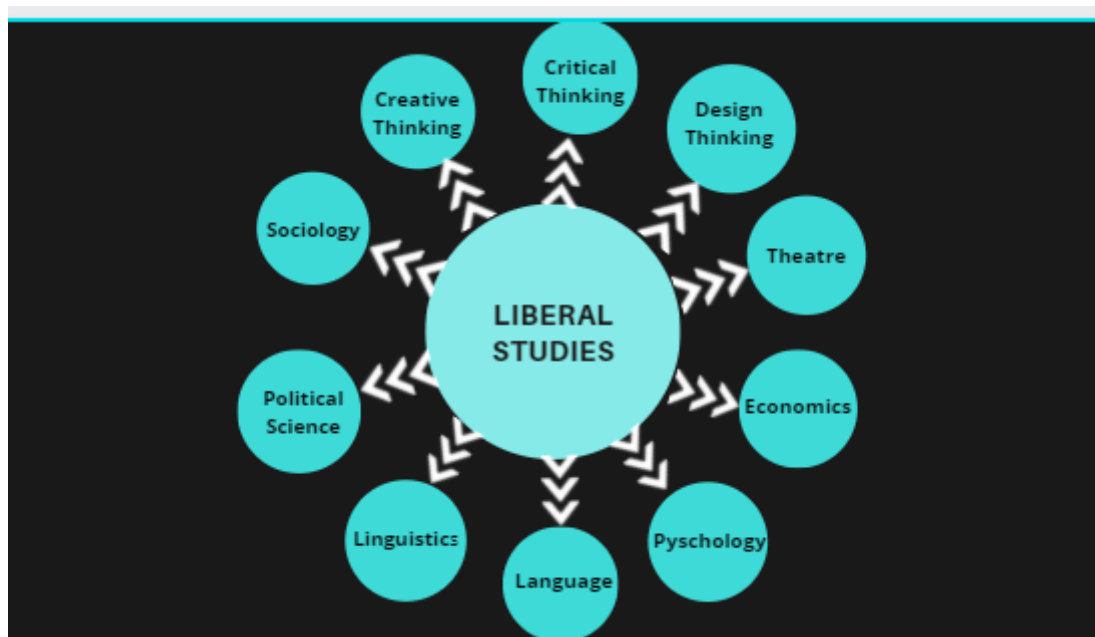


Figure 1 Liberal Studies subjects

- i. Sociology** helps analyze involvement of anonymous individuals to social topics on a global scale. One gets to know more about family interaction, religious traditions, culture, habits and organized crime, and better understand issues like race, gender and social class, which will help in the roles as managers and leaders.
- ii. Political Science** gives input on politics and power from domestic, international, and comparative perspectives. It entails understanding political ideas, ideologies, institutions, policies, processes, and behavior, as well as groups, classes, government, diplomacy, law, strategy, and war.
- iii. In Psychology** one learns to comprehend why people act in a certain way, how they respond to the world around them and which key factors might affect this. These might be social, biological, cognitive or emotional. It is through scientific methods that behavior can be explained.
- iv. Linguistics** provides insight into one of the most intriguing aspects of human knowledge and behavior. Linguistics means learning about many aspects of human language, including sounds (phonetics, phonology), words (morphology), sentences (syntax), and meaning (semantics).
- v. The cognitive benefits of learning languages** are un-debatable. People who speak more languages are supposed to have better memory, problem-solving and critical-thinking skills, raised concentration, and good multitasking abilities, and better listening skills, which is essential for managers and leaders.
- vi. Economics** is about supply and demand, perfect and imperfect competition, taxation, international trade, price controls, monetary policy, exchange rates, interest rates, unemployment and inflation amongst many other topics to understand individual markets, the aggregate economy and government policies.
- vii. Theatre** builds self-awareness, one becomes open and receptive to criticism, teamwork, time management, dealing with various types of people, confidence and public speaking, being realistic, becoming adaptive with good problem solving.
- viii. Design Thinking** improves observation and develops empathy with the target user. Design Thinking supports in the process of questioning the problem, assumptions, and implications.
- ix. Critical Thinking** is the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action. It includes observation, analysis, interpretation, reflection, evaluation, inference, explanation, problem solving, and decision making. Specifically one needs to be able to think about a topic or issue in an objective and critical way.
- x. Creative Thinking** is thinking differently and having a new approach or solution. It helps in generating new and innovative ideas for a new product or service or developing a new approach towards an existing product or service.

The skills that are to be in demand in future are those which cannot be automated by AI or Robots and they can be developed through Liberal Studies. Some of them are given below.

- i. Cross Cultural Competency** Ability to deal with diverse people belonging to different countries, states, religions, castes, having various cultural practices is necessary. This helps in team building. If one is sensitive towards different cultures, it helps in building long term associations. It also helps in avoiding clashes amongst diverse cultures and practices.
- ii. Sympathy & Empathy.** Sympathy is when one understands from own perspective. Empathy is putting oneself in the other person's shoes and understanding why they have particular feelings. This helps in understanding the person in a better way, and provides healthier options. Covid 19 has made everyone realize how important it is in difficult times.

**iii. Ability to pose meaningful questions** Few people fear in asking questions. Few pose irrelevant questions. It is very important to pose the right and meaningful question related to the situation and topic for the session to be effective. Or else it is wasting everyone’s precious time.

**iv. Problem Solving Approach** Problem solving is defining a problem, clarity, determining the cause of the problem, identifying, prioritizing, and selecting alternatives for a solution, develop action plan, execute and evaluate the plan and improve upon continuously. It requires a system centric, problem centric, solution centric and solver centric approach.

**v. Pattern Intelligence** Pattern recognition according to IQ test designers is a key determinant of a person's potential to think logically, verbally, numerically, and spatially. Compared to all mental abilities, pattern recognition is said to have the highest correlation with the so-called general intelligence factor (Kurzweil, 2012). They can connect seemingly unrelated concepts and can draw parallels between seemingly disparate ideas.

**vi. Analytical Skills** Analytical skills are a wide-ranging set of professional qualities that include the ability to think critically, analyze data, make difficult decisions, and solve complex problems. These important skill sets all involve taking in new information and mentally processing it in a productive manner. To improve upon these skills, one can play brain games, learn something new, debate, exercise.

**vii. Ability to learn & synthesize new ideas** Prolific thinking refers to the ability to generate a multitude of ideas and concepts. This skill can be encouraged and strengthened through brainstorming. [Synthesis](#) refers to bringing information together from a variety of sources and forming new ideas about the topics. A student who is good at synthesizing can watch several videos, and come up with a summary that brings together different points of view. New ideas help innovation and development of new products and services.

Evaluative skills, Communication skills, Reflective reading skills, Numerical skills, effective research skills, working in team, self confidence and self understanding are few of the other skills that can be evolved with Liberal Studies.

## **CONCLUSION**

The time has now come to include liberal studies subjects in the MBA degree. The benefits will be it will help to prepare for work in a variety of sectors, expand career choices, will be a stepping-stone to other careers, provide skills to become a valuable community member, and it will make them more appealing to employers.

The types of skills that will attract employers in the future are those skills that cannot be automated by AI or outsourced to robots. These are skills like critical thinking, problem solving, and strategic communications. These human skills allow us to focus on high value work. Liberal education makes a person more empathetic and gives a perspective on life. All these are important qualities for a business leader; they are more than just the problem-solving techniques one learns at a management school.

There is a difference between making a life and making a living. MBA and other professional courses help make a living, but liberal education lets one build a life. B-schools have always shown a remarkable ability to change in accordance with the changing needs of stakeholders. Therefore, business schools should devote a substantial part of their curriculum to liberal studies.

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