

Prospectus for the Launch of the Liberal Arts Education for Undergraduate (Senior Division) Students

In the comprehensive educational reform, we consider the liberal arts education for undergraduate (senior division) students as one of the ways to strengthen the unity as a bachelor's program and envisage the implementation of liberal arts education throughout the four years of undergraduate degree program, and not solely limited to first- and second-year students. Liberal arts refer to the attainments that a person must acquire to be an independent and free individual. Although modern humans are believed to be free, they are actually subject to various restrictions. For example, if we know only the Japanese language, we cannot imagine how speakers of the Japanese language and those of other languages think differently. If we become an expert in one discipline without any knowledge of other specialized fields, we would not be able to effectively cooperate with experts from other areas of specialization in resolving imminent issues at hand. Liberal arts are the knowledge and skills that set humans free by releasing their thinking and judgment from limitations unknown even to themselves and by liberating them from various constraints and restrictions.

The University of Tokyo has offered liberal arts education during two years in the Junior Division. However, liberal arts education should not end after the first two years, but should continue even after the students advance to the Senior Division. In fact, some liberal arts education becomes meaningful only after one has received a certain degree of specialized education. For example, it becomes meaningful when considering the position and meaning of one's specialization in society today, and how it can collaborate with other fields. We can develop the ability to relativize ourselves by encountering others who specialize in fields different from one's own and have different values. There are many ways to do this, such as reading the classics, learning about cutting-edge research in other fields, experiencing poetry, and making comparisons. In view of the fact that data show that Japan tends to have less diversity of specialties (i.e., less collaboration with other fields) in research teams compared to other countries, such relativization skills are necessary to compensate for the deficiencies in previous specialized education.

In this sense, liberal arts education should not simply achieve a static state where students simply have substantial knowledge about a wide variety of subjects. It also requires not only transcending the borders of their areas of specialization, but also "going back and forth" between those borders. It must ensure dynamic thinking that encourages students to go back and forth between multiple disciplines and cultures, crossing various boundaries (those of specialty, language, nationality, and affiliation).

In this context, going back and forth has two meanings. One is going back and forth between different communities. For instance, in lectures open to students from other faculties, there will be a few "away" students—students specializing in other fields—among the many students who share the background knowledge in the area of specialization of the faculties giving such open lectures. In this kind of setting, the "away" students going back and forth between the communities of the "home" students and "away" students will have opportunities to relativize their specialized knowledge. The second meaning is going back and forth between the academic world and real-world challenges, or between professional intelligence and civic intelligence. This second meaning indicates the social literacy of scholars, regardless of whether they specialize in the humanities or science, namely the ability to envision how their research results will be incorporated and translated into society. This is also the foundation that supports research ethics.

We offer liberal arts education in the Senior Division to cultivate an open-minded personality that becomes capable of flexible thinking by taking an interest in other disciplines, cultures and persons, and by recognizing plurality in yourself through dialogue with others who have different specialties and values from oneself.