



# Liberal Arts and Classical Education

# *A Return to Beauty*

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DISCUSSION PAPER

AUGUST 2025

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- ▶ Liberal arts education (also known as “classical”) schools are a recent innovation in the landscape of Australian education, following high growth in recent years in the United States and around the world.
- ▶ As more Australian parents choose a non-government alternative to the government school system including homeschooling amidst falling education results, there is a growing appetite from parents for options above and beyond the state curriculum. Australia appears ready for its own classical education movement.
- ▶ The definition of liberal arts education is not universally agreed upon. Common definitions in the context of present day schooling include the following: the pursuit of wisdom including the intellectual and moral education of the whole person, with an integrated curriculum grounded in the classic texts of the Western tradition, as a means of encountering truth, goodness, and beauty.
- ▶ Liberal arts education can give students a deep knowledge and appreciation of the best parts of the Western heritage, helping them to be more thankful for their opportunities, their country and its civic traditions, while strengthening social infrastructure.
- ▶ Liberal arts education is largely defined by the curriculum content, not just distinct teaching methods or pedagogical approaches. The key to implementing liberal arts education in schools is to ensure the curriculum includes the best parts of the Western tradition, such as the classic literature, art, and music that have endured the test of time, in an integrated way such that the content students are learning in different subjects at any time are related to and complementing each other.
- ▶ While there are logistical challenges to implementing liberal arts education in the context of the NSW curriculum, it is possible for NSW schools to adhere to NESA requirements while providing students with the fundamentals of a liberal arts education and its many benefits.
- ▶ Critical thinking is widely perceived as a key skill for students to thrive in the future. Liberal arts education ensures that students learn to think critically about the most important and enduring topics — such as the meaning of life, human nature, and faith. The content of classical education finds relevance in the present day because it relates to enduring truths from the Western tradition and draws upon the treasury of the best intellectual traditions.
- ▶ Opposition to liberal arts education schools often wrongly asserts they are inherently elitist. In the US, there are many classical education schools that are part of charter school networks; that is, publicly funded and independently run schools serving predominantly students from low-socioeconomic and migrant backgrounds.
- ▶ While some liberal arts education schools integrate their approach with a rigorous Catholic religious education, many classical education schools are not religious. Classical education’s promise can be experienced in secular and faith-based settings.
- ▶ Existing empirical research on liberal arts education schools indicate that they tend to perform at least as well as, if not better than, other schools in terms of academic achievement and preparedness for university. There is no evidence to suggest that academic rigour or the skills needed to thrive at post-secondary education are in any way worse for students in classical education schools.
- ▶ Initial teacher education and teacher professional development options that cover the content and approach of a classical education curriculum need to be more available to meet growing demand.



## Contents

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Preface: Why Liberal Arts Education? .....	3
What is Liberal Arts Education?.....	4
The Benefits of Classical Education .....	6
Knowledge and appreciation of the best parts of our heritage .....	6
Fostering critical thinking about the most important topics.....	6
Unity of content in an integrated curriculum.....	7
A time-tested way to fulfil the goals of Catholic schools .....	7
International Trends in Liberal Arts & Classical Education.....	10
The classical education movement in the United States.....	10
Liberal Arts education in other countries .....	11
Spotlight: Liberal Arts schools in Australia .....	11
Empirical Research on Student Outcomes .....	13
The Compatibility of Classical Education and the NSW Curriculum.....	14
Choice of texts .....	14
Integration of core content .....	14
Supporting teachers in Liberal Arts education .....	16
Teacher education degrees .....	16
Teacher professional development .....	16
Teaching methods .....	17
Conclusions: The Future of Liberal Arts in Australia .....	18
Appendix A: Mapping Classical Education and the NSW 2027-28 HSC English Curriculum.....	19
Appendix B: Example of Classical Education Curriculum Snapshots (From Hartford College) for Years 5-7 in NSW .....	20
Appendix C: ‘Liberal Arts For Contemporary Catholic Schools’, Address by Archbishop Fisher to Sydney Catholic Schools Pastors and Principals Day, 31 July 2024.....	22
Endnotes.....	28

## Preface: Why Liberal Arts Education?

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*“For at our best we are **realists and truth-seekers**, rather than ideologues and fashion-chasers. And the reality to which we seek to open young minds is broader and richer than that offered by contemporary culture: it’s not just about foundational skills like literacy, and numeracy, and a sound knowledge base – important as these things are – but also about memory and imagination, sensitivity and character, including **sacred memory, transcendent imagination, moral sensibility and virtuous will.**”*

Archbishop Anthony Fisher,  
Address to the Australian Catholic Educators Event ‘Meeting the Moment’<sup>1</sup>

Many Australian parents are seeking alternatives for their children’s education. Recently, there have been substantial trends in favour of non-government schools and homeschooling: the percentage of students in Catholic and independent schools grew from 34.2% in 2019 to 36.6% in 2024,<sup>2</sup> and homeschooling doubled between 2019 and 2024 (now around 1% of all students).<sup>3</sup> For some parents, the national or state curriculum on its own is not sufficiently challenging or edifying for their children, or more fundamentally, just not enough! And in the context of falling learning outcomes with Australian students in a long-term decline in reading, mathematics, and science results on international tests<sup>4</sup> and in civics education<sup>5</sup> — despite real total government expenditure per student increasing at an average rate of 2.8% per year for the past 10 years<sup>6</sup> — questions are asked, and alternatives explored.

This trend reflects a desire for an education that goes beyond the offering of the state curriculum requirements and its secular limitations. Parents are increasingly interested in providing their children with a deeper intellectual foundation, one that not only teaches practical skills but also fosters character development and a greater understanding of the human experience, including the study of classical texts and exposure to rich, intellectual traditions. This shift indicates a broadening appetite for diverse educational choices that meet the evolving needs of Australian families.

There are also ongoing concerns about the perceived politicisation of the curriculum in ways that do not foster independent thinking, are not age-appropriate, and do not even give students an understanding of the basics of their own political system. According to the latest civics tests, just 28 per cent of Year 10 students and 43 per cent of Year 6 students have a basic understanding of civics and citizenship. Some have criticised Australian teacher education for being overly political and training teachers without focussing on the foundations of learning.<sup>7</sup> It is understandable why many discerning parents and educators may want to reorient education to the historical mainstays of free inquiry and contestability, with solid foundations of knowledge.

Liberal arts education, also known as “classical” education, is a relatively recent innovation in the Australian education landscape, drawing inspiration from the growing popularity of this educational model in the United States and other parts of the world. Liberal arts schools emphasise the study of foundational texts and an integrated understanding of reality.

Australia is well-positioned to embrace its own liberal arts education movement, one that could benefit students across a wide range of school systems, including government, Catholic, and Independent schools. Parents can ask themselves: What is the cultural inheritance we hope for our children? TikTok videos, reels and likes? Or texts, deep discussion and fellowship?





*“Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”*

T. S. Eliot, Little Gidding (1934)

## WHAT IS LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION?

In an address to Sydney Catholic Schools in 2024, the Most Reverend Anthony Fisher OP, the Archbishop of Sydney, made the case for introducing a liberal arts education into Sydney Catholic schools. He did so through a discussion about the challenges that Catholic schools in Sydney currently face. He suggested that the liberal arts could provide a means of resisting the effects of secularisation and reawakening the world to God.

In order to explain how a liberal arts education can be of use, we need to understand what Archbishop Fisher has in mind by “the liberal arts”. The definition of a liberal arts education is not universally agreed upon, as different educators, scholars, and institutions emphasise various aspects of the approach.<sup>8</sup> Some focus on the structure of the curriculum, while others highlight its philosophical underpinnings. All approaches to liberal arts education tend to converge on a common understanding: **the pursuit of wisdom, including the intellectual and moral education of the whole person, with an integrated curriculum grounded in the classic texts of the Western tradition** as a means of encountering truth, goodness and beauty. This report considers how Archbishop Fisher’s conception of a liberal arts education might be considered for Catholic schools.

Archbishop Fisher begins by explaining what he does *not* mean by a liberal arts education. First, he explains that a liberal arts education is not an education that prioritises the humanities and deprioritises STEM subjects or is in any sense ‘anti-science’. Secondly, he explains that a liberal arts education is not a fixation with the so-called Great Books of the Western canon.

In the classical period, Archbishop Fisher notes, a liberal arts education began with the *trivium* of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, before proceeding to the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music. What matters about this education is the purpose of studying the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. Students should first be taught to think critically and then to express themselves eloquently. Having mastered these skills, the students should be introduced to subjects that arouse a sense of wonder about the world.

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Popular culture, Archbishop Fisher argues, evades the big questions and school curricula tend to dumb them down. In contrast, Fisher advocates for a liberal arts education on the basis that it is intended to cultivate virtues in students – the intellectual and moral character traits of a well-rounded person. It is not a rejection of useful knowledge, but an acknowledgement that education is about more than giving students useful information and skills. It is about the cultivation of the virtues that are necessary in order to find meaning and purpose in life, and to make good choices.

The liberal arts should be seen as an education for life. A liberal education is not presented by Archbishop Fisher as an alternative to the acquisition of the skills necessary for vocational training. Rather, through the cultivation of empathy, passion, and depth of understanding, such an education makes people more humane, a quality that is a prerequisite for any useful life. In the Archbishop's words, it "makes people more employable, not less, even in computing, accounting, or engineering." The Archbishop's concerns extend beyond making students work-ready. He is concerned that a proper education should prepare them for family life, friendship, the life of the mind, and other leisure pursuits such as the arts and sports.

Finally, Archbishop Fisher maintains that Catholic liberal arts can offer an education for eternal life. His point is that this approach to any subject simultaneously cultivates *humanitas* and religious sensibility. This occurs when educators stop separating the maximisation of learning gains and the transmission of faith. Fisher calls for a whole-of-school approach in which spiritual questions permeate teaching in all disciplines, rather than being relegated to religious education classes, giving the following examples:

- Science teachers need not teach creationism, but might "delight in the spirals of a galaxy or a shell and wonder aloud what God was thinking"
- English teachers might ask, when teaching *King Lear*, whether Gloucester was right to say, "As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: They kill us for their sport."

History teachers need not present all history as a battle between good and evil, but they should "identify the power of individuals, institutions, and ideas, including religious ones, to influence the course of history for the better."





# The Benefits of Classical Education

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## KNOWLEDGE AND APPRECIATION OF THE BEST PARTS OF OUR HERITAGE

A key benefit of liberal arts schools is that they provide students with an in-depth understanding of Western heritage, fostering both knowledge and appreciation of its best aspects. Through engaging with history and classic texts, students develop a deeper connection to the cultural and intellectual foundations that have shaped the modern world. Classical education prioritises the study of ancient civilisations, foundational texts, and key historical events that have influenced Western thought.

There is no suggestion in classical education that the Western tradition is without blemish or historical injustices. A deep knowledge of Western civilisation necessarily includes a knowledge of human limitations. The focus is on the *best* parts of the Western tradition, enabling students to understand *why* some aspects of their heritage have stood the test of time.

By reading and analysing works by philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and Aquinas, as well as literary giants such as Homer, Virgil, Shakespeare, Austen, Blake, Keats, Dante Alighieri, Gaskell, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky and Dickens, students encounter timeless ideas about what it means to be human. This immersion in the wisdom of the past helps students understand the development of critical concepts such as democracy, justice, and individual rights, part of the bedrock of Western society.

Engaging with history allows students to recognise the struggles and achievements of earlier generations, from the rise of democratic principles in Ancient Greece to the philosophical foundations of the Enlightenment. This deeper historical context fosters a sense of gratitude, as students become more aware of the intellectual and moral contributions that have shaped their freedoms and opportunities. Through this process, classical education helps students develop not only intellectual skills but also a profound appreciation and thankfulness for the *best* parts of their Western heritage, begetting student inquiry via gratitude, rather than grievance.

## FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING ABOUT THE MOST IMPORTANT TOPICS

Critical thinking is widely perceived as an essential skill for students to succeed in the future, particularly in an increasingly complex and fast-changing world. For this reason, ‘Critical and Creative Thinking’ is included as a general capability in the Australian Curriculum.<sup>9</sup> In a time when information is abundant and rapidly evolving, the ability to analyse, evaluate, and synthesise ideas is considered more important than ever. Liberal arts education places a strong emphasis on developing critical thinking skills by encouraging students to engage with challenging texts and ideas. Students are taught to enjoy, understand, and question (such as through the Socratic method) the material, allowing them to build the analytical skills necessary for thoughtful decision-making in their personal and professional lives.

One of the unique aspects of liberal arts education is its focus on timeless, foundational topics that encourage students to interrogate profound questions such as the meaning of life, human nature, and faith. These are questions that have intrigued and shaped human thought for centuries, and liberal arts education engages students with the works of great thinkers from across the whole of the ancient and modern world. Through an encounter with these enduring ideas, students develop the good habit of deeper consideration of life’s most important matters.

The content of classical education has the benefit of enlivening enduring truths that continue to resonate with modern society. While the context may have changed, the fundamental questions addressed by classical texts — about ethics, government, human rights, and personal fulfillment and purpose— are as pressing now as ever. By studying these core ideas, students gain insights into the

human condition that transcend time and place. Liberal arts education, therefore, does not just teach students about the past; it equips them with the intellectual tools to navigate the challenges of the present and future, grounded in the collective wisdom of the Western tradition.

Classical education's focus on fostering critical thinking — a key objective of the Australian curriculum — through the study of foundational texts that cover the most important matters is also consistent with the general capabilities inserted throughout the curriculum. There are seven learning continuum priorities across the curriculum that are considered important in every subject, including critical and creative thinking.<sup>10</sup> These include four elements: inquiring, generating, analysing, and reflecting, which appear to reflect the Socratic method of encouraging students to question and to analyse and reflect on deep questions raised by classical texts.

## UNITY OF CONTENT IN AN INTEGRATED CURRICULUM



*“The discipline of literature, history, philosophy, science, music, theology, art and the rest serve to enrich the whole child but are also carriers of important spiritual and moral lessons if teachers know how.”*

Archbishop Anthony Fisher,  
*Address to the Australian Catholic Educators Event ‘Meeting the Moment’<sup>11</sup>*

A defining feature of a liberal arts education is an integrated curriculum, which provides students with a holistic understanding of the Western tradition. Unlike more fragmented approaches to learning (such as the typical state curriculum, where the content of subjects in a given year can be unrelated), classical education seeks to unify subjects such as literature, philosophy, and history, showing how they are connected. This integrated approach enables students to see the relationships between different areas of knowledge, deepening their understanding of how ideas, cultures, and historical events shape one another.


In a liberal arts education setting, students can study literature, philosophy, and history not as isolated subjects but as parts of a unified narrative. For instance, when reading the works of classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle, students also engage with the historical contexts in which these ideas were developed. They learn how the political, cultural, and social environments of ancient Greece and Rome influenced philosophical thought, and in turn, how these ideas influenced later periods of Western history. By linking literature with philosophy and history, students gain a richer, more comprehensive view of the ideas and events that have shaped the Western world.

## A TIME-TESTED WAY TO FULFIL THE GOALS OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

A subset of the liberal arts education movement is the growing group of Catholic classical education schools.<sup>12</sup> According to the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education in the United States:<sup>13</sup>

*“Catholic classical education begins with a conviction that Christian civilisation, which had its roots in the Hebrew world, was defined by Our Lord, Jesus Christ, and His disciples, and integrated the riches of Greco-Roman civilisation, is full of truth, beauty, and goodness. Catholic classical educators immerse students in the Church’s 2,000-year-old history and culture. They seek to form graduates and faculty who have been nourished, inspired, and equipped by their inheritance so they may promote the message of the Gospel in our own time.”*





Like classical education schools, they draw upon all of the wisdom in the Western tradition, including the great Greek and Roman thinkers, but they first and foremost place Christ at the centre of all learning.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, every encounter with truth, goodness, or beauty can be an encounter with Christ, and so all subjects at school can lead students towards Christ. The Catholic intellectual inheritance integrates all of the wisdom of the classical texts, but also has a *personal* component that can connect each student to Christ. The focus on developing intellectual, moral, and theological virtues helps students to foster this personal connection.

This aligns closely with Archbishop Fisher's recent keynote address, making the case for a Catholic liberal arts education.<sup>15</sup> To quote the Archbishop, Catholic schools should provide "An education for eternal life" with a holistic approach to education that integrates the different subjects, including religion:

*"A broad education will hopefully excite our students' curiosity about many things, including the divine Logos behind them all. A Catholic liberal arts education will cultivate both their humanitas and their religious sense. Instead of science and religion being rivals for their loyalty, they will come to see the order and beauty in creation as intimating a divine Orderer and ultimate Beauty; the enormity, tininess, sublimity or sheer wonder of the natural world will raise questions not just about why things are as they are, but why there is anything at all, the Cause behind all the causes. Rather than being a vestige of old-world superstition, philosophy and theology will provide foundations for all their studies and draw their various dimensions together. Science and religion will be natural partners; religion and the arts also."*

While many Australian students currently leave school without a deep understanding of either science or religion — not to mention the relationship between them — an effective Catholic liberal arts education would ensure that students have deep content knowledge of each subject, and an ability to bring them together, ultimately to arrive at a deeper knowledge of the truth and be guided further along their faith journey.

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*"The value of an education in a liberal arts college is not the learning of many facts, but the training of the mind to think something that cannot be learned from textbooks."*

Albert Einstein



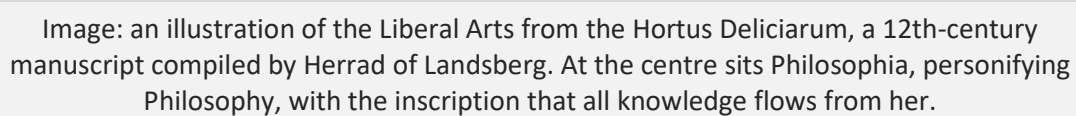


Image: an illustration of the Liberal Arts from the Hortus Deliciarum, a 12th-century manuscript compiled by Herrad of Landsberg. At the centre sits Philosophia, personifying Philosophy, with the inscription that all knowledge flows from her.



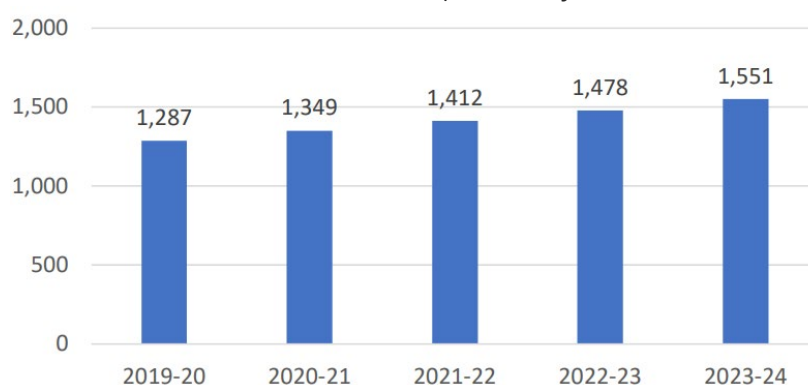
# International Trends in Liberal Arts & Classical Education

## THE CLASSICAL EDUCATION MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

The number of classical education schools in the United States has rapidly grown in recent years. While there remains some lack of clarity over exactly which schools provide (or purport to provide) classical education, the general consensus is that the movement is growing.<sup>16</sup>

A 2024 market analysis by education consulting firm Arcadia Education<sup>17</sup> found that the number of classical education schools in the US grew from 1,287 in 2019-20 to 1,551 in 2023-24, with a 4.8% annual estimated rate of new school growth (see Table 2). The report further estimated that by 2035, classical education schools will have grown to 2,575 schools, accounting for approximately 2.4% of total US K-12 enrollments.

Figure 1: *Classical Schools Growth in the US (number of schools 2019-20 to 2023-24)*



There are nine major classical school associations in the US,<sup>18</sup> including: The Association of Classical Christian Schools; The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education; The Society for Classical Learning; The Classical Latin Schools Association; The Consortium for Classical Lutheran Education; Great Hearts Academies; The Chesterton Schools Network; The CiRCE Institute; and The Hillsdale College K-12 Office. These include Catholic, Protestant, secular, and charter school networks, demonstrating that classical education is firmly established in the US and extends across religious and socioeconomic groups.

While many of these school networks do not receive taxpayer funding and rely on tuition fees for income, some classical education schools are still accessible to parents from all socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, the Great Hearts Academies (based in Arizona) is a charter schools network that is publicly funded and privately run, meaning that it is affordable for parents, and serves predominantly students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, a thriving example that classical education is not an 'elitist' model of education and can be implemented to serve families in low-income neighbourhoods.

There has also been a recent focus at some universities in the US to provide classical education programs for new and current teachers at the growing number of classical education schools.<sup>19</sup> These include teacher professional development programs at a private secular university, and masters degrees at Catholic and non-denominational Christian universities.<sup>20</sup>

## LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN OTHER COUNTRIES

Presently, liberal arts education schools remain mostly a US phenomenon, many similar schools have started up in other countries. For example, the Chesterton Schools Network has schools in Canada, Sierra Leone, and Australia.<sup>21</sup> The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education has member schools in the UK, Colombia, the Philippines, and Slovakia.<sup>22</sup> While these schools may operate differently across countries, they share the same approach to education and the same integrated curriculum (adapted to their own countries' requirements).

## LIBERAL ARTS EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIA

In Australia, there is a growing interest in liberal arts education. A group of teachers have formed an association, The Australian Classical Education Network,<sup>23</sup> which provides resources for Australian educators. At the higher education level, since 2017 The Ramsay Centre for Western Civilization funds students to complete liberal arts degrees in Western Civilization in addition to summer courses for high-school students,<sup>24</sup> while Campion College (Australia's first liberal arts college) was founded in 2006 with the intention of providing students with an education in the liberal arts based on the classic texts of the Western tradition.<sup>25</sup> Graduates from these relatively new institutions may potentially provide a new generation of interest in classical education schools as parents and teachers.

### SPOTLIGHT: LIBERAL ARTS SCHOOLS IN AUSTRALIA

The liberal arts education movement is in very early stages in Australia. Nevertheless, many Australian schools already describe themselves as having a liberal arts curriculum or being classical education schools<sup>26</sup> (for example, St Mary's Cathedral College in Sydney has an integrated approach based on its "Paideia" program<sup>27</sup>).

Beyond this, there are two new Australian schools that explicitly state their identity as being classical education schools:

#### **Hartford College<sup>28</sup>**

Hartford College is Australia's first liberal arts education school for boys (years 5-12) based in Sydney's South East. It started in 2022 and currently has 30 enrolments. It provides a classical education within the Catholic tradition. As of 2024, it is part of the international Chesterton Schools Network of classical education schools.

#### **St John Henry Newman Academy<sup>29</sup>**

St John Henry Newman Academy will be Australia's first co-educational classical education school, opening in 2026 in Brisbane. It will also provide a classical education within the Catholic tradition.



*“The man who has learned to think and to reason and to compare and to discriminate and to analyse, who has refined his taste, and formed his judgement, and sharpened his mental vision, will not at once be a lawyer, [...] a man of business, or a soldier, or an engineer but he will be placed in that state of intellect in which he can take up any of these sciences or callings [...] with an ease, a grace, a versatility, and a success, to which another is a stranger.”*

St John Henry Newman (1852)

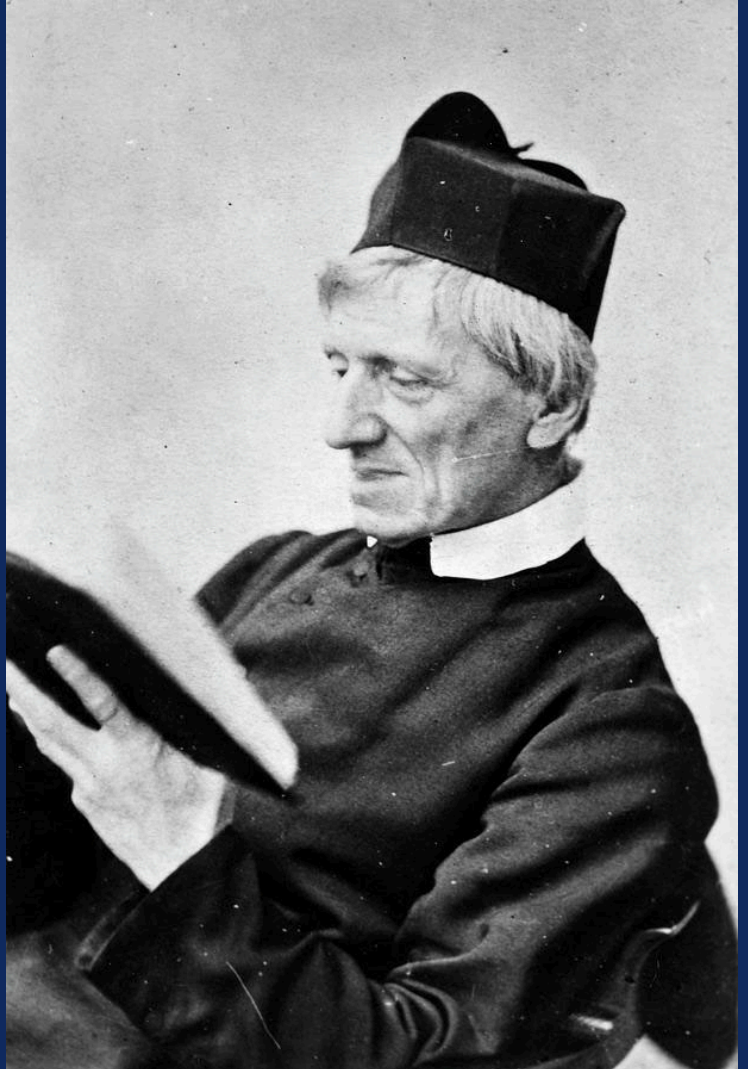


Image: St John Henry Newman (1801-1890). English theologian and Roman Catholic Cardinal. Canonised a saint of the Catholic Church on October 13, 2019.

## Empirical Research on Student Outcomes

There is limited quantitative research on the outcomes of students at classical education schools compared to other schools. The small number of existing studies come from the United States, these studies are summarised in Table 1. Overall, it appears that students in liberal arts education schools seem to perform better in literacy and numeracy tests on average — and also to have a more positive life outlook and better university preparedness after high-school graduation — than students in other schools.

Table 1: *Quantitative Studies on Student Outcomes in Classical Education Schools*

<i>Study</i>	<i>Number of schools/students</i>	<i>Methodology</i>	<i>Findings</i>
Vaughan (2019) <sup>30</sup>	152 Classical Christian schools and 196 non-Classical Christian private schools	Comparison of Preliminary SAT (PSAT) literacy and numeracy results between Classical Christian and non-Classical Christian private schools	Classical Christian private schools had significantly higher literacy and numeracy results than non-Classical Christian private schools.
Goodwin & Sikkink (2020) <sup>31</sup>	2,000 high-school graduates	Self-reported survey outcomes from high-school graduates, comparing classical education schools to government, Catholic, private, and Classical Education schools and homeschooling, controlling for family income	Graduates from classical education schools on average reported better preparedness for university, more positive life outlooks, and more regular religious practice.
McCoy (2021) <sup>32</sup>	3 Classical Education Charter Schools	Case studies with comparison of English and Math proficiency rates and school demographics to district/state averages	Classical education charter schools had higher proportions of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and had higher English and Math proficiency rates (overall and by socioeconomic and racial groups) compared to the local government schools.

However, these existing studies all have substantial limitations. They do not take into account all student and school demographics, and rely on comparisons of average test scores in a given year rather than over time. Future quantitative research with more rigorous methodology is needed before any clear conclusions can be drawn.

Still, there is no evidence that liberal arts education with an expanded focus on classic texts in the Western tradition and an integrated curriculum in any way harms any student outcomes. A liberal arts education approach appears to be consistent with — and potentially even enhances — the focus on improving student literacy and numeracy outcomes in Australia.

# The Compatibility of Classical Education and the NSW Curriculum

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## CHOICE OF TEXTS

From a practical implementation perspective, perhaps the most distinguishing aspect of liberal arts education is the choice of content that prioritises the classic texts of the Western tradition. Beyond any differences in *why* content is taught or *how* it is taught, the liberal arts differ from standard curricula, especially in *what* is taught.

Therefore, liberal arts schools emphasise teaching of the great books of the Western canon, referring to the original Encyclopedia Britannica's 1952 Great Books of the Western World by Robert Maynard Hutchins, and to other more recent Great Books lists such as the popular St. John's College list.<sup>33</sup>

This is entirely compatible with the NSW curriculum for Years K-11, as schools are generally given extensive choice over which English texts they prescribe throughout schooling up until Stage 6 in Year 12. It is a matter of choosing classical texts that are age-appropriate and align with the literacy skills to be learnt at each stage. This would naturally require teachers to be professionally competent with the classical texts, and to understand which are the most appropriate to prescribe for their students in a given year level.

A liberal arts approach to choosing texts is obviously compatible with choosing some non-classical and non-Western texts (including Australian authors and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives) to draw on wisdom from different cultures and to satisfy the NSW curriculum requirements, as long as there is an emphasis on prioritising choice of texts that have stood the test of time in the Western tradition. In other words, a liberal arts education in NSW could simply be to choose a classical Western text whenever there is an option to do so at every stage.

For Year 12, the revised HSC prescribed English texts for 2027-2028 includes many of the great books of the Western tradition for English Advanced and English Extension 1 and 2, but do not include any for English Studies, English Standard, or English EAL/D (see Appendix A). In other words, while classical education schools may be able to provide a classical approach to the study of English for more advanced Year 12 students, it may be more of a challenge for other students who are less proficient in Stage 6. This may present a small challenge for any classical education schools in NSW (at least for 2027 and 2028) — although this is only an issue for Year 12, and possible alternatives to the HSC exist that do not rely on the prescribed English texts (such as the International Baccalaureate).

## INTEGRATION OF CORE CONTENT

A key benefit of a liberal arts education is the integration of core content, such that in any given term, students learn content that is related and complementary, thereby enhancing deeper understanding (as discussed above). While the NSW curriculum is not written in this way, it is still possible for a school to adapt the curriculum in a way that is integrated; for instance, students can learn about ancient Greece in history while also studying ancient Greek literature and art in other subjects.

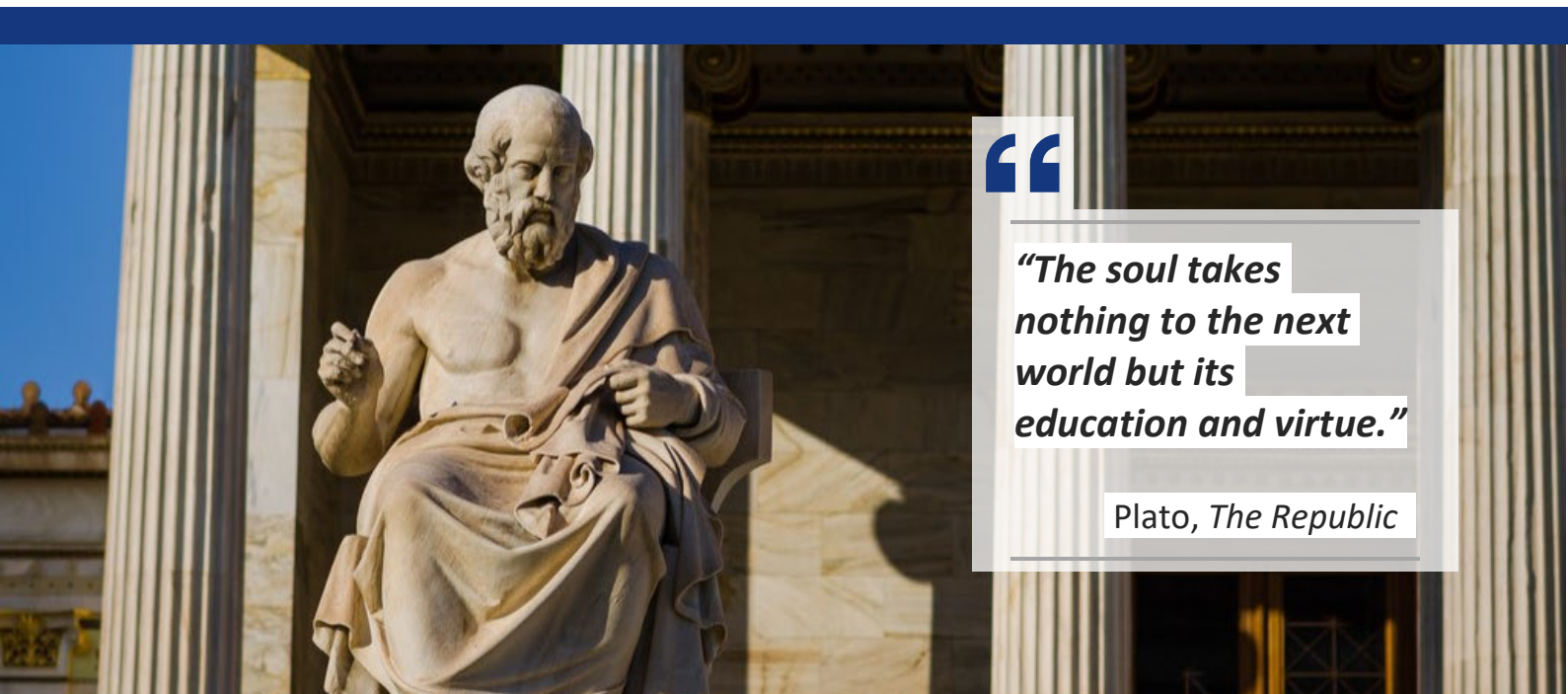
For example, regarding the NSW history curriculum for 2027 onwards:<sup>34</sup>

- In Human Society and its Environment Stage 1 students “Read and recount stories, myths or legends from ancient peoples, places and cultures in China, Egypt, Greece and Rome”, a great opportunity to introduce students to classical Western texts in an age-appropriate way.
- In History Stage 4, while students in ancient history have in-depth study options for Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, Greek or Roman classic texts could be taught in Stage 4 English.

- In History Stage 4, while students in medieval history have in-depth study options for Medieval Europe and Renaissance Italy, classic texts from these periods could be taught in Stage 4 English.
- In History Stage 5, while students in modern history study “The making of the modern world (1750–c. 1945)”, they could also be taught classic texts from this period in Stage 5 English.

A current example of an integrated curriculum (at a bird’s eye view level) from classical education school Hartford College for Years 5-7 is shown in Appendix B.<sup>35</sup>

There could be many other approaches that cover all of the required content as per the NSW curriculum while giving students an integrated understanding of the best parts of the Western tradition. This process requires work and refinement over time but is in no way an insurmountable task.



**Image:** a statue of Plato in front of the Academy of Athens. Plato outlined a classical conception of a liberal arts education as the *trivium* (the three core skills of grammar, logic and rhetoric) and the *quadrivium* (the four more advanced subjects of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music).



# Supporting teachers in Liberal Arts education

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## TEACHER EDUCATION DEGREES

If there is to be an expansion of liberal arts in Australia, then more teachers trained in delivering a classical education curriculum will be required. To empower new teachers to deliver a classical education curriculum, initial teacher education programs will need some thoughtful and substantial additions. It is important to highlight that this would not just involve helping new teachers to learn how to teach classic texts, but also to help them become more familiar and confident with the content of classic texts.

Some initial teacher education program options already exist in Australia for prospective teachers who wish to teach classical education. These include double-degrees of a Bachelor of Education with another Bachelors program that equips students with content knowledge to teach classic texts (such as a Bachelor of Liberal Arts), or the Bachelor of Arts (Western Civilisation)/Master of Teaching program at the Australian Catholic University in partnership with The Ramsay Centre for Western Civilisation. Double-degree options like these could be expanded as the number of classical education schools increases, without necessarily requiring any new programs. However, it would be important to ensure that these programs align with a liberal arts curriculum that includes the great books and how to teach texts in a way that encourages students to question, while drawing out why these classics have stood the test of time.

A further option would be to introduce new postgraduate qualifications for new or current teachers who wish to further specialise in teaching classical education (such as for teacher education graduates who specialised in English or history). These could include graduate certificates, graduate diplomas, or masters in classical education. The graduate certificate option — which tends to be shorter and less comprehensive, taking around six months to complete — could be more practical for current teachers who wish to continue teaching while upskilling in knowledge of the classics and how to teach them effectively. Similar postgraduate programs for qualified teachers currently exist, such as the Graduate Certificate in Religious Education or the Graduate Certificate in International Baccalaureate Education at the University of Notre Dame.

## TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

For current teachers who wish to become skilled at delivering a classical education curriculum, ongoing, effective professional development opportunities will be essential. Universities and liberal arts colleges in Australia that offer courses on the great books or other aspects of classical education could potentially provide professional development days for teachers on specific texts or approaches to teaching the classics. Ongoing training should also emphasise how to build an integrated curriculum across subject areas that reflect the coherence of the classical tradition, which could be especially appropriate for faculty heads or school leaders. As interest in classical education increases, it is also likely that teacher professional development providers will begin to cater for schools and teachers looking for tailored professional development.

It would be mutually beneficial for the relatively small number of classical education schools to partner with the relatively small number of liberal arts and Western civilisation university programs, in order to connect theory with practice and to allow current teachers to benefit from the expertise of academics in their field.

## TEACHING METHODS

There are no prescribed teaching methods in the NSW curriculum, and pedagogy varies greatly across liberal arts schools. Nevertheless, there remains a special focus across parents and schools in NSW on boosting NAPLAN and HSC results.

Common teaching methods in liberal arts schools are entirely consistent with best practice as per the latest in educational research. While classical education schools often have a focus on direct instruction, questioning (part of the Socratic method), and school discipline,<sup>36</sup> these have also been found to be consistently related to higher academic achievement<sup>37</sup> and also practised by some of the top-performing schools in NSW.<sup>38</sup>

To summarise, the teaching methods typical of classical education schools are also typical of schools that achieve excellent academic achievement in NSW. There is no evidence to suggest that classical education requires any alternative teaching methods other than those already commonly practised in high-achieving schools.



## Conclusions: The Future of Liberal Arts in Australia

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*“But secularisation is no fait accompli. Christian institutions, including our schools, can be places that push back against a culture closed to the transcendent and enrich the vision and experience of both students and teachers with a spiritual dimension missing elsewhere. And many of our education leaders and staff are up for the challenge.”*

Archbishop Anthony Fisher,  
*Keynote Address to Sydney Catholic Schools Pastors and Principals Day* <sup>39</sup>

Liberal arts education in Australia is in its early stages. Yet, there is a clear foundation based on overseas experiences for Australian parents to build upon, ensuring that an integrated education of the whole person, grounded in the best of the Western heritage, ensuring students acquire the good habit of critically thinking about the most important things in life. The current Australian and state curricula include scattered exposure to the Western tradition, but do not provide this in a systematic, rigorous or integrated approach.

Despite the recent rapid growth of the liberal arts movement in the United States, there remains some uncertainty about the measurable benefits of liberal arts schools compared to others. Nevertheless, liberal arts is a promising innovation in that it offers families another option that focusses on drawing from the best of the Western tradition in order to educate the whole person.

To date, a small number of independent schools in Australia have adopted the liberal arts approach. a. These are important and inspiring examples from which educational researchers and policymakers can learn, while monitoring their progress in both enrolments and academic achievement. If the liberal arts movement continues to grow in Australia, in future school systems (both Catholic and government) should consider having trials of classical education schools — both for new schools and for existing schools to transition towards — to provide more affordable options for parents yearning for a classical education.

The end goal should be to ensure that a deep knowledge of and appreciation for the best of Western culture is not merely a benefit for the privileged few, but rather a foundation available and affordable for every Australian.



*“The liberal arts do not conduct the soul all the way to virtue but merely set it going in that direction.”*

Seneca, *Moral letters to Lucilius* (AD 62)

## Appendix A: Mapping Classical Education and the NSW 2027-28 HSC English Curriculum

The following is a list of classical Western texts (i.e. by authors who are part of The Great Books list tradition) as prescribed by the NSW HSC 2027-2028 English curriculum, by subject and module.<sup>40</sup>

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Module</i>	<i>Prescribed Classic Western Authors/Texts</i>
English Studies	Narrative and Human Experience	N/A
English Studies	Writing for Purpose	N/A
English Standard and English Advanced:	Texts and Human Experiences	N/A
English Standard	Language, Identity and Culture	N/A
English Standard	Close Study of Literature	N/A
English Advanced	Textual Conversations	William Blake (The Complete Poems) John Keats (The Complete Poems) William Shakespeare (Hamlet) William Shakespeare (Julius Caesar) Niccolo Machiavelli (The Prince)
English Advanced	Critical Study of Literature	Jane Austen (Pride and Prejudice) William Butler Yeats (Selected Poems) William Shakespeare (Othello) William Shakespeare (King Henry IV, Part 1)
English EAL/D	Texts and Human Experiences	N/A
English EAL/D	Language, Identity and Culture	N/A
English EAL/D	Close Study of Text	N/A
English Extension 1	Confessional Worlds	Anne Brontë (The Tenant of Wildfell Hall)
English Extension 1	Historical Worlds	Elizabeth Gaskell (North and South)
English Extension 1	Hybrid Worlds	Jane Austen (Northanger Abbey)
English Extension 1	Natural Worlds	William Shakespeare (As You Like It) Samuel Taylor Coleridge (The Complete Poems)
English Extension 1	Shakespearean Worlds	William Shakespeare (The Merchant of Venice)
English Extension 2	Author Study	Henry James



## Appendix B: Example of Classical Education Curriculum Snapshots (From Hartford College) for Years 5-7 in NSW

Year 5 Snapshot				
Subject	Term 1 Prehistory / Aboriginal History	Term 2 Ancient History - Greece & Rome	Term 3 Middle Ages	Term 4 Modern History
English	Theme: <i>Prehistory Times / Australian Aboriginal History / Origins / Journeys</i> Writing – <i>Imaginative</i> texts	Theme: <i>Ancient History / Greece &amp; Rome / New Beginnings</i> Writing – <i>Persuasive</i> texts	Theme: <i>Middle Ages</i> Writing – <i>Informative</i> texts	Theme: <i>Modern History / The Future</i> Writing – <i>Poetry</i>
Maths	Whole Number: Addition / Subtraction / Multiplication / Division	Length / Area / Volume / 3D Space / Data	Fractions / Decimals Patterns / Algebra Mass	Time / 2D Space/ Angles / Position / Chance
Science	Living World	Earth and Space Digital Technology	Physical World	Material World
History	The Australian Colonies <i>What do we know about the lives of people in Australia's colonial past and how do we know it?</i>	The Australian Colonies <i>How did an Australian colony develop over time and why?</i>	The Australian Colonies <i>How did colonial settlement change the environment?</i>	The Australian Colonies <i>What were the significant events and who were the significant people that shaped Australian colonies?</i>
Liberal Arts World History	The History of the world - timelines and summaries <i>Prehistory</i>	The History of the world - timelines and summaries <i>Ancient History</i>	The History of the world – timelines and summaries <i>Post Classical History</i>	The History of the world – timelines and summaries <i>Modern History</i>
Geography	A Diverse and Connected World <i>How do places, people and cultures differ across the world?</i>	A Diverse and Connected World <i>How do places, people and cultures differ across the world?</i>	A Diverse and Connected World <i>What are Australia's global connections?</i>	A Diverse and Connected World <i>How do people's connections to places affect their perception of them?</i>
PDH	Health, Wellbeing and Relationships Unit Title: <i>Relationships</i> Virtue: <i>Temperance</i> Motto Themes: <i>Self-Mastery, Order, and Moderation.</i>	Health, Wellbeing and Relationships Unit Title: <i>Relationships</i> Virtue: <i>Justice</i> Motto Themes: <i>Sound Judgement, Sportsmanship, Fairness, Humility</i>	Healthy Safe and Active Lifestyles Unit Title: <i>Healthy and Active Virtue: Prudence</i> Motto Themes: <i>Improvement, Respect, Goal Setting, Being trustworthy</i>	Healthy Safe and Active Lifestyles Unit Title: <i>Healthy and Active Virtue: Fortitude</i> Motto Themes: <i>Self-Mastery, and Refinement, Perseverance</i>
PE	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Athletics field events / Strength and Conditioning</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Team Sport – touch football/basketball</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Cricket/Baseball – Throwing, batting, bowling, catching</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Beach safety, Beach regeneration and conservation, Surfing</i>
Visual Arts	Aboriginal Art	The Art of Drawing Art of Ancient History	Art of the Middle Ages	Modern Art
Music	3/4 Time & D.C. al Fine, Singing and Moving	Singing and Moving 5.2, Low D and recorder	World Music	Singing & Moving 5.4. C and the Dotted Crotchet. Playing Xylophones

Year 6 Snapshot				
Subject	Term 1 Prehistory / Aboriginal History	Term 2 Ancient History - Greece & Rome	Term 3 Middle Ages	Term 4 Modern History
English	Theme: <i>Prehistory Times / Australian Aboriginal History / Origins / Journeys</i> Writing – <i>Imaginative</i> texts	Theme: <i>Ancient History / Greece &amp; Rome / New Beginnings</i> Writing – <i>Persuasive</i> texts	Theme: <i>Middle Ages</i> Writing – <i>Informative</i> texts	Theme: <i>Modern History / The Future</i> Writing – <i>Poetry</i>
Maths	Whole Number: Addition / Subtraction / Multiplication / Division	Length / Area / Volume / 3D Space / Data	Fractions / Decimals Patterns / Algebra Mass	Time / 2D Space/ Angles / Position / Chance
Science	Living World	Earth and Space Digital Technology	Physical World	Material World
History	The Australian Colonies <i>Why and how did Australia become a nation?</i>	The Australian Colonies <i>How did Australian society change throughout the twentieth century?</i>	The Australian Colonies <i>Who were the people who came to Australia? Why did they come?</i>	The Australian Colonies <i>What contribution have significant individuals and groups made to the development of Australian society?</i>
Liberal Arts World History	The History of the world - timelines and summaries <i>Prehistory</i>	The History of the world - timelines and summaries <i>Ancient History</i>	The History of the world – timelines and summaries <i>Post Classical History</i>	The History of the world – timelines and summaries <i>Modern History</i>
Geography	Factors that Shape Places <i>How do people and environments influence one another?</i>	Factors that Shape Places <i>How do people and environments influence one another?</i>	Factors that Shape Places <i>How do people influence places and the management of spaces within them?</i>	Factors that Shape Places <i>How can the impact of bushfires on people and places be reduced?</i>
PDH	Health, Wellbeing and Relationships Unit Title: <i>Health and Wellbeing</i> Virtue: <i>Fortitude</i> Motto Themes: <i>Courage, Self-belief, Endurance</i>	Health, Wellbeing and Relationships Unit Title: <i>Health and Wellbeing</i> Virtue: <i>Temperance</i> Motto Themes: <i>Pride in one's work, Excellence, Order, Punctuality</i>	Healthy Safe and Active Lifestyles Unit Title: <i>Safety</i> Virtue: <i>Prudence</i> Motto Themes: <i>Balance, Honesty, Discretion, Reflection, Accepting Others</i>	Healthy Safe and Active Lifestyles Unit Title: <i>Safety</i> Virtue: <i>Justice</i> Motto Themes: <i>Teamwork, Problem-solving, Initiative, Responsibility</i>
PE	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Athletics, Cross Country focus</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Golf / Tennis</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Tai Chi, Martial Arts, Boxing</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Rugby and Soccer</i>
Visual Arts	Aboriginal Art	The Art of Drawing Art of Ancient History	Art of the Middle Ages	Modern Art
Music	note D, Symphony, Beethoven the Classical period, and Ode to Joy	learn and/or sing a new song	Da Vinci's apprentice: viola da gamba	Liturgical Hymns

Year 7 Snapshot				
Subject	Term 1 Prehistory / Aboriginal History	Term 2 Ancient History - Greece & Rome	Term 3 Middle Ages	Term 4 Modern History
English	Theme: <i>Prehistory Times / Australian Aboriginal History / Origins / Journeys</i> Writing – <i>Imaginative</i> texts	Theme: <i>Ancient History / Greece &amp; Rome / New Beginnings</i> Writing – <i>Persuasive</i> texts	Theme: <i>Middle Ages</i> Writing – <i>Informative</i> texts	Theme: <i>Modern History / The Future</i> Writing – <i>Poetry</i>
Maths	Computation With Integers Angle Relationships Indices	Fractions / Decimals and Percentages / Algebraic Techniques / Equations / Data Collection and Representation / Single Variable Data Analysis	Properties of Geometrical Figures Fractions / Decimals and Percentages Length / Perimeter and Area / Volume	Linear relationships Probability Financial Mathematics / Ratios and Rates / Time
Science	Living World	Earth and Space Digital / Technology	Physical World	Material World / Chemical World
History	Depth Study 1 - <i>Investigating the Ancient Past (including Ancient Australia)</i>	Depth Study 2 - <i>The Mediterranean World: Ancient Greece</i>	Depth Study 2 - <i>The Mediterranean World: Ancient Rome</i>	Depth Study 3: <i>The Ancient Asian World – Ancient China</i> Depth Study 4: <i>The Mongol Expansion</i>
Liberal Arts World History	The History of the world - timelines and summaries <i>Prehistory</i>	The History of the world - timelines and summaries <i>Ancient History</i>	The History of the world – timelines and summaries <i>Post Classical History</i>	The History of the world – timelines and summaries <i>Modern History</i>
Geography	Place and Liveability	Place and Liveability	Landscapes and Landforms	Landscapes and Landforms
PDH	Health, Wellbeing and Relationships Unit Title: <i>Relationships</i> Virtue: <i>Fortitude</i> Motto Themes: <i>Self-Mastery, and Refinement, Perseverance</i>	Health, Wellbeing and Relationships Unit Title: <i>Relationships</i> Virtue: <i>Prudence</i> Motto Themes: <i>Improvement, Respect, Goal Setting, Being trustworthy</i>	Healthy Safe and Active Lifestyles Unit Title: <i>Healthy and Active</i> Virtue: <i>Justice</i> Motto Themes: <i>Sound Judgement, Sportsmanship, Fairness, Humility</i>	Healthy Safe and Active Lifestyles Unit Title: <i>Healthy and Active</i> Virtue: <i>Temperance</i> Motto Themes: <i>Self-Mastery, Order, and Moderation</i>
PE	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Water safety and Surfing</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Golf / Gymnastic movements</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Team Sport – Rugby 7s / AFL 9's</i>	Movement skill and performance Practical Component: <i>Archery</i>
Visual Arts	Aboriginal Art	The Art of Drawing Art of Ancient History	Art of the Middle Ages	Modern Art
Music	Keyboard Music	The Concepts of Music	Instruments of the Orchestra	Program Music
Technology	Digital Technologies Material Technologies (Textiles)	Digital Technologies Material Technologies (Textiles)	Engineered Systems Digital Technologies	Engineered Systems Digital Technologies

## Appendix C: ‘Liberal Arts For Contemporary Catholic Schools’, Address by Archbishop Fisher to Sydney Catholic Schools Pastors and Principals Day, 31 July 2024


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I’m so grateful for the literary diet that served me in my Catholic secondary school, named for St Ignatius whose feast it is today. We read Austen, Beckett, Blake, Bolt, Bronte, Chaucer, Chekhov, Conrad, Dickens, Donne, Dostoevsky, George Eliot and T.S. Eliot, Goethe, Homer, Hughes, Huxley, Joyce, Keats, Melville, Miller, Milton, Orwell, Paton, Pinter, Plath, Plato, Poe, Seymour, Shaw, Solzhenitsyn, Sophocles, Steinbeck, Swift, Thomas, Twain, Wordsworth, White, Wilde and Williams, along with two Shakespeares every year, and some Bob Dylan songs. A few weeks ago I saw the Bell Shakespeare production of *King Lear*. Robert Menzies was outstanding as a physically frail yet emotionally explosive Lear, Melissa Kahraman excelled as both Cordelia and the Fool, as did Alex King as Edgar and Tom O’Bedlam.<sup>41</sup> Lear’s is “a domestic crisis wrapped in a political crisis inside an existential one”:<sup>42</sup> his downfall from king to homeless madman, the dysfunction in his family and kingdom, his character flaws and fatal misjudgements, and his raging against the storm he had brought on himself—all are means for exploring questions of identity and diminishment, authority versus ambition, order and chaos, justice against cruelty, meaning as opposed to nihilism and insanity. I heard great lines like: “Many a true word hath been spoken in jest”; “Nothing can come of nothing”; “I am a man more sinned against than sinning”; “Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow! You cataracts and hurricanoes”; “When we are born, we cry that we are come to this great stage of fools”; “Tis the times’ plague, when madmen lead the blind”. The lines, characters and tale have held my attention ever since. But it was my Catholic school education that taught me to appreciate this colossus of plays. What a gift!

### ***I. Know thy enemy, know thyself***

The best-known adage of the Chinese general and philosopher, Sun Tzu, is *know thy enemy*. The longer form of it is “Know your enemy and know yourself and you will win a hundred battles.”<sup>43</sup> Tzu’s point is simple yet critical: whatever our challenges, key to success is understanding what we are up against and what we bring to the challenge. Otherwise, we are shooting in the dark or being highly efficient at doing the wrong thing. We must be clear-eyed about our goals, challenges and resources, and develop a considered approach as much on the sports field as the battlefield, in the classroom as in the boardroom, in our schools as in our parishes.

So, what are the threats? At our last Pastors and Principals Day, I referred to the situation of Catholic schools today as something of a Gordian knot.<sup>44</sup> There are many, complex and interconnected challenges, and we have to be judicious about which are most pressing and which we are best placed to address, while not being distracted from our main game by the endless hiccups. We know that there are real challenges and opportunities in the arena of academic results—our excellence or learning-gain agenda. And so, too, in the areas of funding, staffing and access. Then there are problems regarding transmission of faith: later today, Bishop Danny Meagher and some school leaders and chaplains, will outline some implications of our changing enrolment patterns. Suffice it here to observe that in less than twenty years (since 2006) the proportion of enrolees in Sydney Catholic Schools identifying as Catholic has declined from 85% to 68%, while the proportion of other Christians, other faiths, and those of “No religion” keeps rising. Despite steady enrolment growth we can expect the majority of students in NSW Catholic schools to be non-Catholic a decade from now—that’s already the case in 187 of our schools—and Sydney will not be much better off.<sup>45</sup> Nominal Catholics are becoming a minority in our schools; serious Catholics a much smaller proportion; and this is could be an existential challenge.



This is not the only pressing challenge to our religious mission. We should also be concerned with the religious literacy, commitment and practice among the students entrusted to us.<sup>46</sup> According to the recent Archdiocesan *Survey of Religious Attitudes and Practices*, only 30% of our Catholic students attend Mass more than monthly—and that’s probably an overestimate—and half as many read the Bible with any sort of regularity.<sup>47</sup> Almost 40% never receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, while less than 20% do so with any regularity. Most (54%) think it’s OK to pick and choose religious beliefs, and even more (61%) think morals are a matter of personal choice with no definite rights and wrongs. Fewer than 3 in 10 (29%) are part of a religious group and only 2 in 10 (21%) active in some social justice or service initiative. When it comes to what students know about the faith, the data are difficult to parse, but many of our graduates seem to know less about the Faith than their predecessors. How many are saints, or saints-in-the-making, is even harder to estimate. But unless we squarely face the changing religious profile of our students, we will be failing to give them what they most need, and our Catholic identity will flounder. We must also recognise the cultural obstacles beyond our schools’ control, especially the society-wide phenomenon of *secularisation*.

## ***II. The secularising effect***

For more than a century Catholic education in Australia was self-consciously a response to the Protestant-secular ascendancy; more recently, it has risked being more infected by secularism than antidote to it.<sup>48</sup> But there are many competing secularities.<sup>49</sup> In some parts of the world, it’s said with respect to church and state that “ne’er the twain shall meet”; in others, religious institutions dictate terms to government, society, even non-believers. Some countries mix both extremes.

The Australian take on these things has historically been to distinguish church and state, recognizing that each has its own goals, activities and actors, and seeking as far as possible to live and let live. This disinclines Australians to radical ideological divides and allows church and state to coexist. Mostly they leave each other well enough alone; where they intersect, they can be rivals, but often find ways to collaborate to their mutual advantage. This live-and-let-live, cooperate-when-you-can version of church-state relations has underpinned our educational ecosystem for recent decades: dioceses and parishes put in most of the cost of land and buildings for Catholic schools, the Commonwealth contributes most of the salaries, parents and states put in the rest. Church schools teach the same curriculum as state schools, sometimes with a particular accent, as well as their own spiritual curriculum with which the state does not interfere. It mostly works well, but every generation must make the case anew for this freedom and resourcing, and the relationship evolves over time.

The greatest contemporary theorist of secularisation, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, argues that belief and unbelief have become rival accounts of reason, nature, community and happiness. Whereas in the *enchanted* world of pre-modernity people’s self-concepts, communities and cosmologies assumed God’s active presence, belief in God has become difficult for many in the progressively *disenchanted* scientific age.<sup>50</sup> Christianity has itself contributed to some of this secularisation through its insistence that some things are rightly rendered unto ‘Caesar’ and some to ‘God’ (as Jesus said) or that there is a ‘city of God’ and a ‘city of man’ (as Augustine put it), even if the two spheres interpenetrate and we bring the one Christian conscience to both.<sup>51</sup> Liberal democracies and liberal education were ultimately built upon these Christian reconciliations of the sacred and profane.<sup>52</sup> Yet, since at least the Renaissance and Reformation, that ancient compact has been unravelling and for many social elites and some whole populations a godless humanism now severs individuals from society, society from the cosmos, and the cosmos from God. Contemporary society is marked by expressive individualism and a materialist conception of reality, whilst more communitarian and spiritual conceptions are denigrated as immature or benighted. Sustaining life and health, maximising wealth and consumption, and getting our own way are now what matter most, however unsatisfying that might be. In this worldview there are no more angels and saints, martyrs or



heroes; bibles and prelates have no magisterium; there is mimesis no longer of the Christian story in education and the arts; and if the old social and cosmic imaginaries have been displaced, the new ones “fail to touch the bottom of anywhere” (to quote Taylor again).<sup>53</sup>

Modern Australia evolved at the height of these cultural shifts. The child sexual abuse crisis served to magnify disillusionment with institutional religion and accelerate disaffiliation and disconnection. Various ideologies and interests now coalesce to marginalise Christians: we might consider recent pressure to remove charity status from church schools and their building funds, to defund and nationalise church schools, hospitals and cemeteries, to forbid church institutions considering faith and witness in hiring staff, to require Catholic health and aged care facilities and professionals to do or refer for things contrary to the faith, and to ‘cancel’ anyone with unfashionable religious-moral views. For all the talk of ‘tolerance’, secularism is increasingly doctrinaire and intolerant both of religion and old-style liberalism. Many are left in a spiritual desert, with no moral compass and no-one to accompany them through life’s struggles.

The corrosive effects of secularisation upon the Catholic DNA are evident in our institutions: many Catholic school teachers no longer themselves practice and are unacquainted or out-of-sorts with substantial parts of the doctrine and morals they are charged with teaching; and the demographic trends to which I previously averted mean the students they teach (and their families) are often indifferent to religion.<sup>54</sup> Other teachers and students, though officially Catholic, have so little connection with Church outside school that they seem lost at Mass. But secularisation is no *fait accompli*. Christian institutions, including our schools, can be places that push back against a culture closed to the transcendent and enrich the vision and experience of both students and teachers with a spiritual dimension missing elsewhere. And many of our education leaders and staff are up for the challenge.

### III. The liberal arts model

To this end, I want to make a case today for the Liberal Arts as one strategy for resisting a narrowing secularism and reopened the world to God.<sup>55</sup> The Roman philosopher-statesman Cicero was the first to use the term ‘*artes liberalis*’, literally the knowledge worthy of a freeman,<sup>56</sup> and advocated a broad yet comprehensive education that equips a person to live as a free-thinking citizen, not merely a tradesman. He was heavily influenced by Athenian models of ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία or general education preparatory for a public life.<sup>57</sup> And so, from classical Greece and Rome through the Middle Ages<sup>58</sup> and Renaissance,<sup>59</sup> to the Christian humanism of St Ignatius and the Jesuit schools,<sup>60</sup> the Scottish enlightenment,<sup>61</sup> U.S. college system<sup>62</sup> and John Henry Newman,<sup>63</sup> this broad programme of teaching and learning ‘for its own sake’ was foundational for many schools and universities in the West.

📖**10** Some conflate the term *liberal arts* with the humanities, or parody it as an impractical rival to the STEM education that gets you a job, or reduce it to an elitist, regressive, colonial diet of supposedly Great Books.<sup>64</sup> But a liberal arts education is much broader and richer than these caricatures. In the classical period, it began with the *trivium* of grammar, logic and rhetoric to teach critical thinking and effective articulation, followed by the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music to encourage wonder about creation and confidence in navigating it. These grounded the range of humanities and sciences, and were supplemented by physical and spiritual education.

So a genuine liberal arts education is not ‘anti-science’ or fixated on ‘the classics’: it prizes literacy *and* numeracy, and all that is based on each, and enquiry for its own sake and not just for utilitarian ends. It resists early specialisation in vocational disciplines and seeks to form the whole person, cultivating intellectual virtues and skills for seeking meaning and purpose, and moral virtues for good character and choices. It promotes critical and interdisciplinary thinking, and raises the big questions popular culture evades and many contemporary curricula dumb down. By equipping students to appreciate

the depth of human existence, the wonders of the universe, the coherence of rational inquiry and the genius of human creativity, the Catholic intellectual tradition sought to enlarge hearts and horizons with truth, beauty and goodness.<sup>65</sup>

#### **IV. An education for life**


Modern education is often focused on technical mastery, ATARs or job-readiness, to the neglect of what ultimately fulfills the human person. In *The Liberal Arts Tradition: A Philosophy of Christian Classical Education*, Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain recently made a case in philosophy of education for a rich curriculum of the seven liberal arts, along with other parts of philosophy, history, the visual and aural arts, debating, gym and theology, for the holistic education of mind, body, will and affections.<sup>66</sup> From a very different point of view, in *The Evidence Liberal Arts Need*, Richard Detweiler looked at the hard data on the lasting effects of such education upon success, leadership, altruism, learning and fulfillment over a lifetime.<sup>67</sup> In *The Liberating Arts* Jeffrey Bilbro and team argued that, far from being luxuries in a world where getting a job, building relationships, feeding the hungry, and reversing climate change must be the priorities, only the liberal arts will ground the empathy, passion and depth to address such concerns.<sup>68</sup> Far from allowing dead white males to keep colonising the world, they open people up to other perspectives and impel them to work for a better world. Paradoxically, a broad humanistic education makes people more employable not less, even in computing, accounting or engineering. And then there's life *beyond* work—a life of family, friendship, knowledge, beauty, leisure and sport—for which the liberal arts set people up for life.

If the SCS *Amadeus Programme* offers every child the chance to learn a musical instrument, it's because this will extend for some at least in ways that they'll appreciate for the rest of their lives. There's also plenty of evidence that music study makes students more successful across the board academically—even in STEM subjects.<sup>69</sup> It also allows for some market differentiation in the rivalry for enrolments; some parents, at least, will care that we are making the most of their child's potential. In an increasingly competitive education 'market' and an age where tribalism no longer guarantees Catholic enrolments, distinguishing our schools becomes a matter of survival. What do we offer beyond a religious-moral-pastoral ethos that will draw parents to entrust their children to us and pay for the privilege?

#### **V. An education for eternal life**

A broad education will hopefully excite our students' curiosity about many things, including the divine Logos behind them all. A *Catholic* liberal arts education will cultivate both their *humanitas* and their *religious sense*. Instead of science and religion being rivals for their loyalty, they will come to see the order and beauty in creation as intimating a divine Orderer and ultimate Beauty; the enormity, tininess, sublimity or sheer wonder of the natural world will raise questions not just about why things are as they are, but *why there is anything at all*, the Cause behind all the causes. Rather than being a vestige of old-world superstition, philosophy and theology will provide foundations for all their studies and draw their various dimensions together. Science and religion will be natural partners; religion and the arts also.

Too often we see maximising learning gains and transmitting faith as two distinct projects requiring a custom response to each. Of course, there are different subject matters, methods and teachers. But we cannot put all the weight of transmitting the faith on 1 to 3 hours per week of religious education, the odd school liturgy or retreat, and a few religious symbols and practices. Nor can we reasonably put all the responsibility upon the shoulders of Principal and R.E.C., R.E. teachers and a local priest. Especially when there's little back up from home, no contact with the parish, and indifference or hostility to faith in the broader culture, we need to think outside the box about how we might use all the means available at school, not just the R.E. classes. Here, again, the liberal arts have much to offer, for much of what informs our religious understanding, character, memory and imagination comes



from outside the R.E. curriculum—from history, visual art, sacred music, literature and philosophy. But if we are to make the most of these opportunities, we will have to be much more intentional about it. Unless we think bigger, we risk fewer genuine Catholics emerging from our schools and entrusting the next generation to us: again, that’s an existential challenge, not just an evangelisational [sic] one. And again, it speaks to our concern for whole-child education.

Which means all subjects and staff must be harnessed for religion, all given the p.d. they need to be willing and able to open up spiritual questions in their discipline. The *whole school* should be a centre of the new evangelisation, not just one corner or a few teachers. Not that our Science teachers (or primary teachers when doing science) would be teaching ‘Creation Science’, but they might delight in the spirals of a galaxy or a shell and wonder aloud what God was thinking. Not that our English teachers would make the *Catechism* or the *Bible* their study texts—though the latter *is* great literature—but rather that they’d choose novels, poems and plays that raise the big questions; they might ask, for example, whether *Lear’s* Gloucester is right to say, “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods: They kill us for their sport.” Not that our History teachers will be framing all history as a battle between good and evil, Catholics and the rest, but they *will* identify the power of individuals, institutions and ideas, including religious ones, to influence the course of history for the better.


Thus education becomes a project where mind, body and spirit are formed, where the riches of faith are explored, and where every dimension of human learning becomes a tile of a mosaic of great beauty and wonder. In *Why Choose the Liberal Arts* Mark Roche develops three overlapping arguments: the intrinsic value of learning for its own sake, including exploring the questions that give meaning to life; cultivating intellectual virtues necessary for success after school, including in our lifelong calling; and thirdly, the development of character and a sense of higher purpose and vocation.<sup>70</sup> In *Reclaiming the Christian Intellectual Tradition* Gene Fant, echoing St John Henry Newman, suggests a liberal education can form students as spiritually and intellectually empathetic people, passionate about serving God, Church and world.<sup>71</sup>

Such an education, to return to Charles Taylor, will help students break free from the ‘immanent frame’ that limits their world to the observable, controllable and buyable, and open up for them an enlarged world and more transcendent awareness.<sup>72</sup> Only such an open educational environment will make space for sacred memory, imagination and will, enable a compelling case to be made for Christian belief, prayer and life, direct the natural curiosity of the young towards God, and resist cultural pressures to make our schools indistinguishable from secular ones. While by no means the whole answer, the liberal arts can help make our schools places of sacred culture, of encounter with Christ in adoration, pilgrimage, catechesis and service—whetting the spiritual appetite, communicating the ineffable, and persuading the rationalistically resistant.

### **Conclusion**

So I leave you with some questions: What would be the benefits and costs of a serious liberal arts turn in Catholic education? How might we cultivate a more expansive educational environment whereby all academic disciplines interconnect and serve the transmission of faith and development of the whole child? What are the implications for how we structure, lead and resource our schools; educate, select, develop and support our teachers; settle curriculum and pedagogies; and develop relationships with families and parishes?

Today I have explored one of several ways we could ‘value add’ to the Catholic school and better serve the Church’s mission of whole-child education, transmission of faith and morals, and support for all. There is much more to be said about this, and other ways we could go. But this one has great support in our Catholic tradition. Here I conclude with the account in the *Acts of the Apostles* of St Paul debating the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers in the Areopagus.<sup>73</sup> St Luke reports that the



Athenians loved hearing the latest ideas and talking endlessly about them. So they invited Paul to offer his countercultural views. He stood up and said something like this: “People of Athens! I see you are very religious, for wherever I look you have objects of worship and even an altar to the Unknown God. But I want to proclaim to you the God I know. Since He made the world and everything in it, you should know Him too, from your observation and reasoning about creation, from your philosophy, arts and sciences. Your own Cretan philosopher Epimenides rightly said that in Him ‘we live and move and have our being’. Your Cilician Stoic Aratus taught ‘We are God’s offspring’. Well, then, in all your teaching and learning, you should be coming closer to God and bringing others with you.”



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