

The globalization of education

BY FRANCO PAVONCELLO

John Cabot University, an American accredited English-language college in Rome's Trastevere neighborhood, is more than just a growing success. It is a reflection of the globalization of higher education.

Graduation ceremony at the John Cabot University in Rome.

In 1497 John Cabot (born in Gaeta as Giovanni Caboto), sailing under the auspices of the British crown, landed in what is today Newfoundland in northeastern Canada, beginning the British colonization of the North American continent. It should come as no surprise then that, in choosing a name for an American university with a special attention to Italy, its founders decided to adopt the name of John Cabot.

John Cabot University is a US accredited, American overseas liberal arts university, operating in Rome since 1972 as an American four year college, with the authorization of the Italian government.

The model of JCU is quite unique because it brings together, in roughly equal numbers, visiting students from more than 160 universities in the United States who come to study in Rome for a semester or academic year, with our own degree-seeking students from all over the world, including a sizeable number of Americans and Italians, as well as students from Russian-speaking republics and Middle Eastern countries. This mix creates a truly unique atmosphere that exposes international students to the typical American campus, and US visiting students to a genuinely international environment.

In 1990 the university moved its campus from the outskirts of Rome to a beautiful compound in the heart of Trastevere, on the grounds of the Villa Farnesina. This was a strategic move for John Cabot University, opening up new opportunities for its development, which has reached full speed in the past few years. Since 2008

John Cabot has experienced very strong growth, almost tripling its enrollment, both in terms of visiting and degree-seeking students, with present enrollment at about 1,300 students. This growth has been accompanied by a steady expansion of the university's facilities, with the opening of a second campus on Lungotevere Sanzio, the imminent acquisition of a third building for academic and administrative needs, and the opening of two large beautiful residential facilities within walking distance from the university. Parallel to that, over the years JCU has enlarged its academic offerings from just Business and International Politics to 13 majors, including – among others – History and Humanities, Art History, English Literature, Marketing, and Economics and Finance, with a total offering of approximately 300 courses per semester. The expansion of the university has been accompanied by a steady growth in the name recognition and global reputation of John Cabot as a first class liberal arts college, with its graduates accepted into graduate programs in the most prestigious universities around the world.

Identifying the reasons for this recent unusual growth may prove to be an interesting exercise, as it might offer some interesting glimpses into the changing nature of higher education, and touch upon the new opportunities and challenges that a rapidly changing world is producing for colleges around the world.

Probably the most important factor in explaining John Cabot's growing success is to be found in the quality, nature, and variety of its academic offering. This has been the main focus of an administration that has painstakingly worked to build the academics of a world-class liberal arts college. It is well known that the American model of higher education is one of the most successful exports of the US. It is a model that slowly but surely has spread around the world and has started to transform centuries-old traditions. At the core of this model lies the American style general education curriculum. This curriculum is based on the liberal arts tradition, which is built upon three main pillars:



The first is teaching students how to think, i.e. helping them develop critical thinking skills. This is a fundamental aspect of education, empowering students with the tools to be life-long learners, to be able to evaluate theories and arguments, and to remain independent thinkers throughout their lives.

The second skill – closely related to the first – is the capacity to write and speak clearly in an elegant and well structured fashion. In today's fast-changing, connected world, the art of conversation is a skill of paramount importance, but so is the capacity to express oneself with the new media that have been sprouting up around the world at dizzying speed. Obviously, it is becoming self-evident that this capacity to communicate gives its utmost rewards if it is in English. The English language is the new "lingua franca," whether we like it or not. The world is full of beautiful languages and there are more people speaking Chinese or Spanish than English, but it is an objective fact that when people around the world who don't share the same language speak to each other, they do it in English, the undisputed language of globalization. So, institutions that provide a genuine, solid working knowledge of the English language objectively open up po-

tentials of study and careers that would otherwise remain closed.

Last but not least, the student must acquire an awareness of and empathy with the main issues and challenges of our societies and the world in general. This does not involve simply a passive understanding of historical trends, but it also assumes the ability to be aware of new social phenomena and rising transformations. In our fast-changing world, the capacity to blend creativity and innovation has become of vital importance.

John Cabot University has forcefully pursued this road, hiring outstanding faculty from more than 20 countries all over the world, with a deep commitment to this model, and providing a learning environment in which the intellectual and human exchange between professors and students is seamless, constant, and enriching. It is a model that involves the exposure to many subjects, from the humanities to the sciences, to literature and the social sciences, regardless of a student's major. But it is also a model which stresses heavily the quality of academic performance for both faculty and students. A performance which is constantly monitored, and if not maintained, swiftly sanctioned.



Overhead view of the John Cabot University campus on the grounds of the Villa Farnesina in Rome, Italy.

Equally important is the international context within which this experience has been placed, and in this JCU offers a unique model, with its multicultural environment, located in one of the most beautiful and important cities of the world in which history, art, and modern cosmopolitan trends mix in an extraordinary way.

We live in a global society in which the capacity to communicate across cultures is of paramount importance. At the same time, multiculturalism should not be automatically given a positive connotation. Interaction with people from other cultures and nationalities can also be problematic, resulting in suspicion and mistrust. To be a positive force, this interaction must be based on authentic, enlightened dialogue and a capacity to discuss issues, to analyze them free of all the ideological superstructures that provincial traditions tend to slap on them, with willingness and capacity to understand the reasons behind other people's traditions and cultures.

Thus, good liberal arts and genuine international dialogue go hand in hand, because their coming together builds on a pursuit of truth and objective knowledge, free of short-lived fads, self-referencing prejudices, or herd mentality. Let us make clear that the importance of this fusion between the American college curricular approach and the international context of education is not a mere theoretical guess or supposition. It is a key quality that guides the choice of com-

panies and organizations around the world in privileging students with those backgrounds because they are more agile learners, open to self reliance and experimentation and – no less important – not afraid to fail.

This is an important consideration, because a university is not a cold dispenser of information that must be sought by isolated, stressed individuals running from one office to the next, trying to figure out what to do. A university is an organic, integrated community in which students don't just study and think, but also learn to be leaders and active members of that community. Students provide leadership and youthful energy to the life of a university in many ways, from involvement in clubs and initiatives to making their voices heard in order to question authority. That is an essential part of student education.

At the same time the university must offer more than the academic classroom experience. It must also be a comprehensive provider of services. Students and professors must be put in a condition to produce at their best, with an efficient supply of information and knowledge, satisfactory living conditions, integrated cultural and recreational activities, solid medical care and good, healthy food.

Furthermore, the university must insure the best opportunities for students to be exposed to the outside world – to the job market. A solid offering of internships, both in quality and quantity, are an essential part of the student experience, as much as the possibility of being exposed to job searches and interviews with potential employers while still at the university. An active Career Services office is an integral part of a good university, and JCU is certainly in a leadership position in that field, with more than 200 companies offering internships to our students every year, with a plethora of companies participating in our career fairs each semester in order to recruit good students and future employees.

All these factors together help explain the success of our graduates in quickly building a career or continuing their graduate education in the most prestigious universities around the world. That is one of the leading criteria to determine the quality of a college. There is a definite interaction between the reputation of a university and its capacity to place its graduates in top graduate programs. One feeds the other, and the increasing numbers of our graduates attending institutions like Oxford, Cambridge, NYU, Columbia, Bocconi, and other top Italian universities – to mention just a few prestigious ones – is a great indicator of the academic quality of our program.

Our young people are growing up in a radically different world than the one their parents or grandparents lived in. The global communication and technological revolution is transforming the world quickly and per-



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vasively, in ways few in the older generations can fully grasp. We are looking at a rising generation of “technological natives” who take for granted skills that were unknown and unheard of only 20 years ago. All this generation of students needs is to be empowered, to be offered the right tools, and the channels and opportunities to express their intrinsic potential, their intellectual powers, and their youthful energy. When they are granted those channels, young people simply shine and surprise us for the quality of their work and achievements. They must be allowed to blossom, and they must feel that what they do is part of a well thought out plan for success. If that is given to them they achieve spectacular results. If that is denied to them, they become frustrated, apathetic, and demoralized, with no sense of future or personal goals. That is the worst thing we can do to our younger generation, and failing them like that will exact a great toll for the future of our entire society.

The technological and cultural transformations of the past decades will probably have far reaching consequences for higher education and for the liberal arts tradition in particular. There is a growing trend to

equate learning with the acquisition of mere technical skills. Furthermore, the rise of the so-called MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), allowing thousands of students to study a variety of disciplines – from economics with the top economist of Stanford, or politics with the best Harvard political scientist – for free, is only another formidable challenge that technology is bringing to traditional colleges. In spite of those rising challenges, however, the impact of the liberal arts campus remains a formidable, unsurpassed tool for educating and empowering our young people, and the growing trend of placing such a campus in an international context makes it an even more compelling recipe for producing the global leaders of tomorrow. It is on this strength that JCU plans to continue its growth in the next decades, which promise to be as dynamic, demanding, and exciting as the previous ones.

Nearly 8,000 students take part in the college entrance exam for art at Shungeng International Convention and Exhibition Center on February 27, 2015 in Jinan, China. About 900,000 applicants take the national college entrance exam for art in China every year.

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