Dear Colleagues,

'*Universities acknowledge that they have a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world and to the communities they serve, to benefit humanity and contribute to sustainability*.'

This is one of the key sentences in the Magna Charta Universitatum 2020 which until now has been signed by some 400 universities worldwide. Which is a clear expression that the academic responsibility to society is accepted by many of us.

In support of this and related core principles and values the Magna Charta Observatory has now launched a new initiative to invite and promote academic research on 'The Responsive and Responsible University'. Attached to this letter you will find a Conceptual Framework of this initiative.

The basic thinking of this ambition is threefold.

First of all, we are observing that many colleagues worldwide are subscribing to this responsibility to society principle but finding it not at all easy to put it into practice in their teaching, learning and research strategies and activities.

In view of this it seems to us that it probably makes perfect sense to study the why and how of success and failure for the purpose of learning from practical experience, or rather from the lessons learned by colleagues.

Last but not least we think that such peer learning will be particularly helpful if it were based on solid research into relevant cases and the mechanisms that defined their success or failure. Of course, such research must be of a reflexive nature, analytical and (self)critical to be transferable to other cases and to other contexts. Its primary object should not be the presentation and evaluation of individual projects but rather the portfolio of engagement of an individual institution, including the perspective of relevant external partners involved.

This letter is an invitation to indicate your interest in joining this initiative and contributing to its further definition and development. This can be done by completing the online form at this link:
https://forms.gle/u4kYhZMDZwT3n9Kv7
Such indication of interest should include a first description of the scope of the research to be undertaken, the disciplinary fields of study involved as well as relevant external partners. We would like to receive these by February 1st, 2023. The Magna Charta Observatory itself will provide leadership and support by means of its standing committee on research and offer some facilities for supportive desk research where this is needed.

On receipt of the indications of interest the committee will select a first group of signatory universities wishing to contribute to the initiative for its further development. It is our plan to have a meeting of this group some time in Spring 2023.

We do hope that many of you, from various parts of the world and a wide diversity of institutions and contexts, will be participating. By doing so this initiative could become yet another way to underpin the global nature of our Magna Charta community of universities. Thereby strengthening and supporting the mission of independent and responsive universities worldwide.

MCO chair and Research Committee chair

November 11th, 2022

Research Committee of the Magna Charta Observatory

The Responsive and Responsible University - A Conceptual Framework

Version of 2022-10-04

Introduction

The 2020 *Magna Charta Universitatum*[1] states unambiguously that 'universities have a civic role and responsibility', and that:

> Universities acknowledge that they have a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world and to the communities they serve, to benefit humanity and contribute to sustainability.

In support of this principle, and in the context of its commitment to academic freedom and institutional autonomy, the Magna Charta Observatory (MCO) has launched a long-term research theme on 'The Responsive and Responsible University'. The Research Committee of the MCO presents here a conceptual framework for universities' responsiveness to societal challenges and, more fundamentally, their academic responsibility to society.

The idea of academic freedom

There is a voluminous literature on academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The Research Committee intends to compile a structured bibliography, beginning with a survey of existing bibliographies.

- We acknowledge that definitions and discussions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy take on different meanings and perspectives in different contexts. In some jurisdictions, for example, 'academic freedom' is regarded primarily as an individual right, almost synonymous with 'tenure' and/or with freedom of expression. The Research Committee intends to focus more on freedom and responsibility at the institutional and collective level.
- It is also important to note that the concepts of academic freedom and institutional autonomy as expressed in the English language do not necessarily translate unchanged conceptually into other languages and cultural contexts. As far as possible, the Research Committee would attempt to capture such meanings as well.
- Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are often under threat. These threats can be external or internal, and there are many examples of both kinds – historical as well as contemporary. Internal threats would include for example neglect, or appropriation, or fragmentation. External threats may

[1] See http://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/mcu-2020 .

come for example from populist or repressive regimes, which see the exercise of freedom as a threat to their own dogmas. It is necessary for the academic community to defend academic freedom against such threats, and to support those who are in the front line of fighting for academic freedom.

- For academic freedom not to become another matter of dogma, however, it is necessary that we should constantly and critically re-examine why we believe it to be important, and how best to make the case for it.
- The key idea of this document is that academic freedom amounts to more than just being left alone to do whatever we want to do. The Research Committee believes that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are concepts best understood within the context of a value system centred on our collective contribution to the public good. Therefore, we put forward the proposition that academic freedom will be advantaged and strengthened if we also affirm (and act on) the principle that with freedom comes responsibility – in particular, our responsibility to society.
- There are two key questions in academia: What are we good *at*?', and 'What are we good *for*?'. The first is a familiar question to which each university and each professor can respond fluently and at length. The 'good-at' question is an internal, supply-side question, which correlates with the notion of academic excellence. The second question has less often been asked, but is equally important and increasingly coming to the fore. The 'good-for' question is about purpose. It is a demand-side question regarding our role in society, and our contribution to the common good.
- There is a standard response to the good-for question which is a version of the 'invisible hand' argument in economics: that as long as we have the academic freedom to produce curiosity-driven knowledge, and we do it well, then benefit to society will automatically result in the long run. The classic formulation of this position is by Abraham Flexner in *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge* (1939), and Vannevar Bush in *Science: The Endless Frontier* (1945). History shows many examples of curiosity-driven research leading to societal benefit. However, while most academics accept the 'invisible hand' argument as true, it is increasingly being recognised that it cannot be the whole truth, and while it may be necessary it cannot be sufficient. The benefits produced by the invisible hand are slow in coming and unpredictable in nature. While the invisible hand may produce many future benefits, it often fails to respond to present needs. For example, when the COVID-19 pandemic came upon us, universities could not just sit back saying that the invisible hand will take care of it.
- The good-for question cannot be answered only by reference to the good-at question; it must also be addressed on its own terms.

The changing mission of higher education

It is an empirical observation that a number of developments in higher education worldwide point towards a change in our understanding of the mission of higher education, and an increasing emphasis on the good-for question. Here are some examples.

- The idea of engagement – variously also referred to as outreach, service, or community interaction. Two seminal documents in this regard are Ernest L. Boyer's 1996 article 'The scholarship of engagement', and the 1994 book by Gibbons *et al*, *The New Production of Knowledge*, which introduced the distinction between Mode 1 and Mode 2 knowledge. The idea of universities' engagement with society has become part of the academic lexicon: there are many books, articles, conferences and international networks on the topic of 'the engaged university'. It has also taken various twists and turns, such as for example the somewhat unfortunate terminology of engagement as a 'third mission' of the university, which creates the impression of a 'third silo' alongside two existing silos of research and teaching. The Research Committee would regard engagement rather as a methodological matter: the deployment of our research and teaching towards societal benefit. It is also important to emphasize that engagement is not a matter of charity, or philanthropy – we stand to gain from it as much as we hope to deliver.
- The idea of research impact. Beginning with the 2014 Research Excellence Framework in the UK, a new and additional question is being asked about research evaluation. The classic research assessment question is about the quality of individual research outputs, as judged through peer review: 'How good is it?' The new and additional question is about the societal impact of research conducted by a university: 'What difference has it made?' And: 'What evidence can you provide of such impact?' The idea of impact has proved to be very fruitful, and an 'impact agenda' of one kind or another has taken shape in a number of countries/jurisdictions besides the UK: Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland and Italy, for example. It has also been adopted by the Global Research Council.
- The idea of university social responsibility. By analogy with *corporate* social responsibility, the idea of *university* social responsibility is that the success of the institution should also be measured in terms of its role and effect in society. This takes effect for example in terms of challenge-led research (sometimes also called mission-oriented research) and the pedagogical model of service learning (also called experiential learning), which some universities are now making part of the undergraduate curriculum.

The idea of responsiveness

The idea of engagement with society is laudable, and has been productive, but it is necessary to recognise that the activity of engagement cannot be an end in itself. Engagement must be a means to an end – it must have a purpose. The test of our engagement with society is not the amount of activity, but its effect: whether we contribute to the public good by helping to address societal problems. Increasingly, therefore, there is a question beyond engagement: in what manner and to what extent do we *respond* to societal challenges? Responsiveness involves a different methodological approach from the classical curiosity-driven research and teaching knowledge for its own sake. Its impetus comes from societal need, rather than individual curiosity, and its implementation typically takes place in interaction with

strands of civil society. (By definition, the 'invisible hand' mechanism is not responsive.) Here are some examples of responsiveness:

- It is generally agreed that the global response of Higher Education to the COVID-19 pandemic has been a success story. There are lessons to learn from this success regarding the methodology of responsiveness. Already there are books, articles, conferences and webinars on universities' response to the pandemic.
- The United Nations Sustainable development goals. Increasingly, universities are beginning to build their own portfolio of SDG-responses. There are also a number of agencies working specifically on the SDGs, such as the United Nations University, the UN Academic Impact, and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- Many universities are responding to demands for social justice, in various different arenas. Some universities, for example, shape their admissions criteria to promote equality and/or diversity; others might work actively with local schools, or mount a campaign against racism, or strive towards decolonisation.
- For some, the defence of academic freedom also necessitates a defence of democracy, on the argument that the freedom of institutions require being situated in a free society.

While short case studies of responsiveness may be valuable information of what happens at specific universities, the Research Committee is particularly interested in transferable lessons and methodological analyses. The methodology of responsiveness is as yet under-explored.

The idea of academic responsibility

Given the empirical observations above regarding a change in our understanding of the mission of Higher Education towards greater responsiveness to societal needs and challenges, the question arises whether there is a single fundamental concept which underpins all these various developments. The Research Committee would argue that this is indeed the case. The fundamental idea underpinning the change in higher education to embrace the good-for question is the idea of *academic responsibility to society*, in the sense of universities acknowledging that they have 'a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world'. Besides the 2020 *Magna Charta Universitatum*, such an idea of academic responsibility to society has also been raised in other contexts and various other declarations, such as for example by the Council for Europe and the International Science Council.

- There are good arguments for articulating and adopting the concept of academic responsibility to society.
    - The logical argument is based on the principle that responsibility is the inescapable counterpart of freedom. If this is true in general, we conclude that must be true for academic freedom as well.

- The empirical argument amounts to a consideration of examples such as those listed above as evidence of universities already developing sense of academic responsibility.
- The moral argument is that if we have the intellectual resources and the knowledge base to contribute towards alleviating societal needs and addressing societal challenges, then we have a moral responsibility to do so. (This observation in effect reiterates the point about our value system: that freedom must be exercised for a purpose.)

- Various distinctions can be made.

  - We may distinguish between internal and external responsibilities. Internal responsibility forms the agreed canon on how we operate, and is based on well-known concepts such as objectivity, rationality, rigour, universality, honesty etc. External responsibility concerns our role in society, and deals with ideas such as engagement, responsiveness, impact, social justice, tolerance and inclusivity. It is external responsibility which is the topic of our conceptual framework.
  - We may distinguish between positive and negative responsibilities – just as we distinguish between positive and negative liberties.
  - We may distinguish between individual and collective responsibility. The Research Committee is primarily interested in the collective responsibility of the university. In the research impact agenda, for example, the expectation of impact falls in the first place on the institution, not on the individual.

- There would be value in a discussion of risks and rewards associated with the principle of academic responsibility to society. As regards risks:

  - There is the risk of misperception: that advocating a sense of responsibility may be misconstrued as an anti-freedom agenda. The Research Committee advocates a concept of freedom *with* responsibility; and is opposed to any idea of freedom *'versus'* responsibility.
  - There is the risk that others (a government, political parties, single-issue activists, pressure groups, donors, alumni, …) might be keen to prescribe to universities what they consider our responsibilities ought to be. The Research Committee is adamant that any such prescription amounts to an infringement of academic freedom and institutional autonomy.
  - There is the ever-present risk of external coercion, nominally on the ground of responsibility to society. The Research Committee reiterates that responsibility to society is not a matter of slavish obedience to the state, or to any political creed or dogma. It is a time-honoured responsibility of academia to speak truth to power.

  The Research Committee would argue that the rewards of acknowledging our responsibilities to society outweigh the risks.

- There is the reward of being able to articulate, fluently and convincingly, what universities are good *for*, without relying only on the 'invisible hand' argument.
- There is the reward of occupying a morally defensible position.
- Above all, there is the reward that by acknowledging and articulating our academic responsibilities we strengthen the case for academic freedom. As is stated clearly in the 2020 *Magna Charta Universitatum*: "Intellectual and moral autonomy is the hallmark of any university and is a precondition for the fulfilment of its responsibilities to society".

In conclusion, the Research Committee would propose two fundamental principles characterising the coupling of academic freedom with societal responsibility:

- *Every university should be free to decide for itself where its responsibilities to society lie, and how to act on them.*
- *No university should neglect doing so*.

This conceptual framework reflects the thinking of the Research Committee at the first onset of the planned process; it is to be tested and developed in the course of time by the research contributions the Committee is inviting and which it hopes to be stimulating.

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