

## **Universities in Croatia**

In view of the current situation and planned legislative developments in Croatia, the Magna Charta Observatory of Fundamental University Values and Rights is concerned by the potential internal and external threats on the institutional autonomy of universities in the country.

The Magna Charta Universitatum is built on accumulated experience regarding the most suitable means and methods of university self-governance, both from the point of view of the institution itself and of its relations with society. It calls for the autonomy of universities as diversified, yet integrated entities for teaching and research. While these activities are typically carried out in a variety of units such as faculties, institutes, laboratories and support services, all these units are internal, constituent parts of the university and contribute to its overall mission in academe and society.

The basic principle of university autonomy applies not only concerning external political or financial powers, but also with regard to threats resulting from internal fragmentation. The fragmentation of universities into numerous independent units separately negotiating their role and budget with government jeopardises the integrity and even the very notion of the university. Hence, it poses a fundamental threat to the existence of the university as an autonomous academic entity able to take responsibility for institution-wide governance, for the coordination, quality and relevance of its teaching and research activities, and for its overall responsiveness and accountability to society.

The Observatory does not challenge the possibility for legitimate national authorities to organise their higher education system, including concerning the various types, the number and the governance of universities. However, universities cannot exist, in the most essential meaning of the Magna Charta Universitatum, where each unit can at its discretion opt either to be part of it or to establish itself as a fully separate legal entity pursuing its own aims in its own way.

The Observatory is fully aware of the great variety in the internal articulation of universities and of the diverse patterns concerning the distribution of responsibilities and tasks between the university's central authority and its constituent parts. However, only universities which have the possibility to define their mission and priorities, make strategic decisions, enter contractual obligations and allocate resources from the point of view of the whole institution can be called autonomous. Only universities able to act as a single entity and to speak with a single voice are in a position to function efficiently in the knowledge society and successfully in the challenging new European higher education area.

In the same way the Magna Charta does not prescribe any particular model concerning university budgets or fees. However, direct strategic and financial dealings between parts/units of fragmented universities and governmental agencies, when by-passing the university as such, constitute a serious risk that the autonomy of the university is

undermined and could therefore not be reconciled with the principles of the Magna Charta.

The Observatory is issuing this opinion in order to draw attention to the need to avoid developments in Croatia which would be contrary to the Magna Charta Universitatum. In this regard, the Observatory urges the Croatian national authorities :

- to fully observe the basic principles of the Magna Charta calling for the institutional integrity and autonomy of universities;
- to define and implement organisational and financial rules in keeping with international standards, not least in the light of Croatia's expressed interest to join the current endeavour for the creation of a coherent European higher education area;
- and to enter into a new phase of dialogue on these issues with relevant European organisations and Croatian universities - including the University of Zagreb, which has been a signatory of the Magna Charta since 1988.

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