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Free in principle (but with a few strings attached)

Mi piace

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27 September 2012

By [Matthew Reisz](#)

Academic freedom has always depended on how well universities satisfy the goals of politicians and demands of the economy.

That was the viewpoint put forward by Sir Peter Scott, professor of higher education studies at the University of London's Institute of Education, in a keynote address for a conference on the subject last week.

Rectors and vice-chancellors from around the world came together in Bologna on 21 September to mark the 24th anniversary of the Magna Charta Universitatum, issued when the world's first university in the Italian city celebrated its 900th birthday in 1988. The document laid down core principles, including the assertion that "the university is an autonomous institution at the heart of society" and that "teaching and research in universities must be inseparable".

The aim of the event was to examine whether such ideals retain their significance in an era of globalisation and "the entrepreneurial university".

Opening the conference, Anna Glass, secretary general of the Magna Charta Observatory, acknowledged that the universities of today "market themselves more and more as instruments for private gain".

Yet she still said institutional autonomy was "essential, not as a shield to protect the independence of the university but as the basis for the university's legitimacy as an essential pillar of society".

She was followed by Sir Peter, who argued that "academic freedom has always been conditional - and, to a large extent, contingent on the 'success' of the university in satisfying political goals, social aspirations and economic demands".

Did the high ideals of Bologna's Magna Charta, he asked, represent realities, inspiring aspirations or just "the rhetoric that rectors, presidents and vice-chancellors indulge in before driving their universities in ever more entrepreneurial directions?"

Other speakers examined whether the principles of the Magna Charta were too European to be applicable to Asia or the Middle East, how academic freedom had been protected in the transition to democracy in Eastern Europe and South Africa, and what was now needed as new regimes emerge from the Arab Spring.

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Readers' comments

- **Dr Howard Fredrics** 27 September, 2012

In other words, according to Prof Scott, there is only academic freedom if one toes the government party line, as he did in overseeing the falsification of NSS results, inflation of pass rates and graduation rates by whatever means necessary, including the, at least, tacit approval of pressurising external examiners to give positive reports on standards.

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- **rueful_rabbit** 28 September, 2012

In this country, maybe. As so often, UK comes across similir to a third-world banana republic.

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