

EUROPE

Is the Magna Charta Universitatum still relevant?

Lee Adendorff

30 September 2012 University World News Global Edition Issue 241

More than 110 experts met in Bologna on 21 September for the 24th anniversary of the Magna Charta Universitatum – a declaration on university principles that has been signed by 750 universities worldwide. More than 110 academics and university administrators met in Bologna, Italy, on 21 September for the 24th anniversary conference of the Magna Charta Universitatum – a declaration on fundamental university principles that has now been signed by some 750 universities worldwide.

Anna Glass, secretary general of the think-tank, monitoring body and signatories association Magna Charta Universitatum Observatory, said the aim of this year's conference was to "open up a conversation" – "a kind of old-fashioned Twitter to see what is trending...and to see if an addendum should be added to the Magna Charta to reflect today's context".

Although it originated in Bologna in the late 1980s, as Europe moved towards a common government and currency, the Magna Charta Universitatum is distinct from the Bologna process – a movement with which it is often associated.

The Bologna process is a continuing project to make university standards comparable across Europe through the development of a common European Higher Education Area, while the Magna Charta Universitatum is a two-page declaration defining key philosophical principles underpinning the existence of universities – notably, academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

Questioning relevance to modern universities is now timely; nearly 25 years after the birth of the Magna Charta Universitatum and the Bologna process, the world is quite a different place. The fall of communism and the creation of the European Union have seen a vastly different political landscape emerge in Europe.

The internet, with its imperfect but unprecedented form of participative democracy, is now a part of daily life, and universities have undergone massive transformation – in many cases, they are actively engaged in partnerships with industry and business interests, making the commercialisation of knowledge often part and parcel of university activity.

With this in mind Sir Peter Scott, professor of higher education studies at the University of London's Institute of Education, gave the keynote address at the Magna Charta conference, kick-starting the conversation about where this leaves the declaration's lofty principles.

Scott presented an analysis of the situation facing today's 'entrepreneurial' universities as they juggle academic dignity and efficient administration, adding that while he thought these compromises were necessary to the survival of institutions, "the core values of the Magna Charta have a place in establishing the limits to this compromise".

He underlined the important role that creativity plays in innovation – and with it, the need for freedom, noting that 'clever cities' or innovation clusters are more likely to happen "in places like California than Saudi Arabia".

Speaking to *University World News*, Scott said he believes there is room to update the Magna Charta Universitatum, noting the large number of non-European delegates at the meeting – particularly from Turkey and Egypt.

“If [the Observatory] is going to be a more global organisation, I think it has to move beyond the European-focused rhetoric...and I think you need a programme of work linked to that,” he said.

Concepts of autonomy vary

Scott’s observation was echoed in a panel chaired by London-based Voldemar Tomusk, director for institutional support at Open Society Foundations, with the participation of Abdul Razak Dzulkifli, vice-chancellor of Albukhary International University in Malaysia, Jairam Reddy from the Durban University of Technology in South Africa and Lesley Wilson, secretary general of the European University Association, or EUA.

At the panel Reddy recounted the South African experience, where – despite quality assurance and accountability mechanisms being in place – institutional autonomy has become a pressing issue.

He made reference to a recent episode involving the dismissal of a vice-chancellor by Higher Education Minister Blade Nzimande; the vice-chancellor was replaced by an administrator in a case that disturbed the academic community and was eventually taken to South Africa’s high court.

With allegations of financial and institutional mismanagement at several historically disadvantaged institutions, Nzimande is currently considering changes to the Higher Education Act to give the government greater control over university management – a move that is sure to cause further controversy.

Dzulkifli provided insights on the Asian front, noting that the concept of institutional autonomy is narrower in Asia, with universities prioritising the number of “employable graduates”; the idea that “research must be marketable” has, at times, seen the humanities snubbed in favour of commercially more favourable research, he said.

Dzulkifli underlined the symbiotic relationship many communities in Asia have with their universities, stressing that institutional autonomy implies a constant dialogue and interaction with those communities, as well as a responsibility in terms of their needs and global issues such as poverty and sustainability.

“The idea of the Ivory Tower is just not appropriate...[to develop the Magna Charta] it’s not just about European humanist traditions...there are other international perspectives that need to be taken into account,” he said.

The EUA’s Wilson said that autonomy remains a fundamental issue in Europe, and that her association has spent more time discussing this topic with its members than any other issue.

“How the rector is appointed, how the institution spends its budget, whether the state has a say in that, and how staff are appointed remain core issues in European debates,” she said.

And although student and community groups were notably absent from the conference, a

panel was set up to tackle the issue of stakeholder perspectives: Christopher Medalis from the US-based Institute of International Education – administrators of the Fulbright scholarship programme – for instance, said that American philanthropists continue to play an important role in the US higher education system.

Apart from financial incentives like tax concessions, Medalis said that many industry stakeholders look at their investments in universities as a way to influence future decision-makers, as well as boost their company's public image and fulfil their corporate social responsibilities.

Private investment in universities has also drastically increased the complexity of stakeholder relationships, noted moderator Dr Jochen Fried from the independent, non-profit think-tank Salzburg Global Seminar. This, he said, has led to the creation of a class of professionals devoted to managing these relationships.

Panel member Professor Cemil Arıkan, director of Turkey's Sabanci University, said that his relatively 'young' university – which enrolled its first students in 1999 and is one of Turkey's 60 'foundation' universities, funded entirely by philanthropic foundations – employed 20 people to manage the very complicated relationships it has with external stakeholders.

"Collaboration [can involve] start-ups, technology transfer, spin-offs...you need intermediary structures to manage these," he said.

Sociological aspects of autonomy

In a third panel on the sociological aspects of institutional autonomy Hans Adriaansens, founder of University College Utrecht in The Netherlands, said that it was a mistake to shun the knowledge economy.

He underlined the importance of the academic and professional formation undertaken by the university, questioning whether or not the ideals of the Magna Charta Universitatum sufficiently cover the reality of the modern university.

Joseph Jarab, a renowned Czech academic and former member of the Magna Charta Universitatum Observatory, added a further warning about the mechanisms needed to support institutional autonomy.

Since the 1989 revolution, he said, the number of universities in the Czech Republic has increased dramatically, but there has been no concurrent increase in the quality of university education. Funding, he added, is essentially based on research output and student enrolments without a diversification in university types and offers.

A thought-provoking point of view was presented by Albanian journalist Fatos Lubonja, who spent 17 years in an Albanian prison (until 1991) because of his dissident writings.

He said that universities in his country are currently under control of the new 'oligarchs' – a criminal class that uses universities to serve their own purposes, including selling degrees to the highest bidder.

Lubonja's intervention was a stark reminder of the diverse political realities guiding the developments of the modern university – with some of those realities not unlike the

threats that faced the original authors of the Magna Charta Universitatum a quarter of a century ago.

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