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The Bologna chorus: harmony from two tones of same note

Mi piace



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Higher education has room for both high ideals and pragmatism, Matthew Reisz hears in Bologna

In higher education, "Bologna" tends to refer to the complex and painful process, set in motion by the Bologna Declaration of 1999, through which ministers attempt to harmonise qualifications across Europe. Yet there was also another important Bologna initiative: the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, signed in September 1988 by 388 leaders of higher education institutions - 900 years after the founding in the city of the world's first university.

The Magna Charta focuses on four core principles: institutional autonomy, academic freedom, the inseparability of teaching and research, and, perhaps most contentious, the idea that "a university is the trustee of the European humanist tradition" as well as committed to "the vital need for different cultures to know and influence each other".

The *Magna Charta* Observatory was founded in 2001 to promote these values and monitor any threats.

So what is the relationship between the two Bolognas - the Bologna of high ideals and the Bologna of pragmatic compromises? On one level, they seem compatible. Opening the observatory's "conversation on academic freedom" in September, secretary general Anna Glass noted that the four principles had been "highlighted among the main goals of the European Higher Education Area outlined in the Bucharest Communiqué" in April, which marked the latest stage of the Bologna Process.

Glass also pointed to factors that have contributed to making conditions very different from those that prevailed in 1988, among them globalisation, economic crisis, upheavals across the Middle East, new tuition fee regimes and the increasing marketisation of higher education.

"What role do the principles set forth in the *Magna Charta Universitatum* play in [today's] environment?" she asked. With its 25th birthday coming up, "should the Universitatum text be revised? Is an addendum needed? Does the document continue to serve its purpose as it stands?"

Üstun Erguder, current president of the observatory's council (and former rector of Boğaziçi University in Turkey), proclaimed that research should be "morally and intellectually independent of economic power". Yet other speakers at the event, which brought together about a hundred university leaders from around the world, challenged the universal validity of *Magna Charta* principles, questioned how far they were being respected and tried to untangle the tensions between the two Bolognas.

Cooperative governance

Jairam Reddy, chair of the council at the Durban University of Technology, offered his native South Africa as "an example of a post-conflict society". Legislation enacted under president Nelson Mandela had explicitly protected academic freedom and institutional autonomy through a system of "cooperative governance", which allowed the state to "steer but not control or interfere with universities". Yet it was "a sign of how soon governments can begin to intrude on university matters" that the country's recent Higher Education Act allowed the minister to remove the

council or vice-chancellor of a "seriously dysfunctional" university. Dr Reddy was delighted to report, however, that when an administrator was sent to check up on a particular institution, the management team decided to exclude him - and the courts upheld their right to do so.

The global picture, in his view, was even bleaker, with the values of academic freedom and institutional autonomy "virtually unknown", for example, in the Middle East. Perhaps we needed an "Academic Freedom Watch", using the *Magna Charta* as its benchmark, he added, on the model of Human Rights Watch.

Witnesses to other political transitions also had sobering tales to tell. Josef Jarab was sent down a mine as a dissident student but went on to become the first freely elected rector of Palacký University in post-communist Czechoslovakia (where he is now professor of English and American literature).

The good news, he said, is that "we have demilitarised our cities and turned some military buildings into libraries, with 40 rather than 14 per cent of 18- to 25-year-olds now attending university. Yet in 1989 we knew what we wanted to get rid of but didn't know how to build academic freedom and institutional autonomy into policy.

"It was easy to turn former communist headquarters into universities, but we don't have enough professors to go around. The Bologna Process gave us a chance to embrace a diversity of missions for our universities, but we missed it."

The situation in Albania, according to the writer and dissident Fatos Lubonja, was even worse. Some private universities, he claimed, were "used as a facade for money laundering by oligarchs keen to take political power and to indoctrinate students with 'the myth of the market'. What can autonomy mean in such a context?"

A different perspective was provided by Abdul Razak Dzulkipli, vice-chancellor of Albukhary International University in Malaysia.

In Asia, he explained, "we see universities as rooted in society, part and parcel of the community. Notions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are still relatively new, and we retain certain ideas of what is sacred and permanent even in times of change. We have other reference points than 'Bologna' and the European humanist tradition."

'Enlightenment values'

It was left to Sir Peter Scott, professor of higher education studies at the University of London's Institute of Education, to tackle head on the issue of the two Bolognas in his keynote address.

The *Magna Charta Universitatum*, he suggested, "looked back to an age of university freedom (that, in truth, may never have existed) in which Enlightenment values and cultural responsibilities continued to be celebrated". The focus of the Bologna Process, by contrast, was "the modernisation of European universities through greater compatibility of degree structures, the more explicit articulation of what has come to be called a 'quality culture', increasing levels of social and economic engagement and so on - in short, many of the characteristics we associate with 'modern and entrepreneurial universities'". Was there not a built-in tension between these two visions, with entrepreneurial ideals inevitably putting pressure on academic freedom?

Scott went on to suggest two alternative responses. One was that institutions need values to guide them even when they cannot fully live up to them.

"In the contemporary university," he explained, "many compromises and adjustments have to be made - for example, agreeing to commercial confidentiality clauses in industrially sponsored research contracts, or accepting national security constraints in the case of military research, or offering scholarships for elites from repressive regimes...reference back to core values (such as those expressed in the *Magna Charta*) helps to establish the limits of these compromises and adjustments."

Yet Scott also believed it was possible to make a case for "a much more dynamic relationship between *Magna Charta* values, pre-eminently academic freedom, and the instrumental and entrepreneurial activities of the modern university. Without academic (and, hopefully, critical) freedom, creativity cannot flourish - creativity in all domains (intellectual and cultural as well as scientific and technical). And without creativity, there can be no innovation."

This was particularly true, continued Scott, in the context of the "clever cities" described by the American urban theorist Richard Florida: "This is the idea that the world's most creative places are also its most dynamic and innovative - and entrepreneurial. In these places, nearly always cities or regions that contain one or several universities, creative people of all kinds - artists, social experimenters, scientific innovators, business

entrepreneurs - rub shoulders together. And it is the mix that matters. This has always been true in the context of the arts...This idea explains why the future is being shaped in California, not in Saudi Arabia - or even Shanghai."

To that extent, at least, the values proclaimed in the world's first university city still retain their relevance for the cities of the future.

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