



David John Lock, Secretary General (Designate)

Magna Charta Observatory

Introduction

I am delighted, if more than a little daunted, to have been selected to be the next Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory.

The fundamental principles for which the Observatory stands are as important today as they ever were. Universities are increasingly expected to play a larger and more diverse role in the development of nations, economically and socially, and to do so more cost effectively. A consequence of this is that those fundamental principles are facing greater challenges.

This makes the role of the Observatory more important and puts pressure on it to provide greater support for its signatories and prospective signatories through the development and effective provision of its services.

I have been asked to introduce myself, share with you what I think I might bring to the role of Secretary General, and make some observations about aspects of the task ahead.

About me

I bring to the Observatory a passion for Higher Education. This was born from studying and teaching economic organisation and researching aspects of strategic planning at the University of Bath.

Some would say that I then 'lapsed' into educational administration and moved to the 'dark side'. Others tell me that I 'found the light' and moved into a regional planning and development role in further and higher education. It was an exciting time with greater vocational emphasis and new pedagogies challenging more traditional methods. IT was making an entrance and there was great excitement surrounding the launch of the first desk-top computers and Apple Macs. Colleges and Polytechnics in the UK were being given more powers to govern their affairs and shoulder more responsibility for their financial performance.

Tempted by the challenge of enabling this change to happen well I moved to be the first Secretary of the newly incorporated Polytechnic of Huddersfield and then on to the more traditional University of Hull to be its Registrar and Secretary. Those were very different institutions. Each had slightly different values and missions. But both had academic communities which were passionate about their purpose and a fundamental integrity. They taught me a lot about governance and leadership. Being at the centre of their development for a total of 14 years enabled me to understand how institutions and state agencies relate and respond to each other.

My first international adventure came when I was asked to set up the British University in Dubai. On arrival in the Emirate in 2003 there was literally a Royal Decree establishing the University and a hole in the ground for its physical foundations. From those it was my task to build a university which would operate to 'British Standards' in disciplines which were relevant to the development of Dubai.

Agreeing the values of the University with the initial and very internationally diverse group of faculty was a vital step before we drafted the various plans, Bye laws, regulations and procedures.



BUiD opened 11 1/2 months later and is now recognised as being one of the premier providers of postgraduate programmes in the UAE. While not as large as its competitors its integrity and QA processes have drawn the respect of British university partners and commercial partners and international collaborations have resulted.

I come to you most recently from the UK's Leadership Foundation for Higher Education. There my task was to develop the international activities of the Foundation. These include projects in over 30 countries, including both developed and emerging economies. A sequence of 9 programmes for Pakistan, a major programme with Iraq, an urgent programme with Libya following the fall of Colonel Gadhafi and most recently a programme for 60 Rectors from Kazakhstan, probably had the greatest impact on the development of more autonomous Higher Education systems and universities. The development of collaborations with the Association of Arab Universities and ARLENE have been particularly significant.

So, how might these experiences have prepared me for the role which I now contemplate with the Observatory?

Levels of Leadership

From starting with leadership development for Vice-Chancellors, or those with the potential to become so, the Leadership Foundation has developed its provision to work also with members of governing bodies, heads of departments, directors of services and also with students. The importance of having effective leadership at all levels of a university is well known to me and I have seen how universities have been able to raise their game through investing in structured strategic leadership development plans. This will help with securing the effective autonomous operation of universities.

Students

I have been instrumental in designing leadership programmes for students. In the UK there was (and still is) the Student Governors programme to prepare them to be effective during their year or two as a member of a governing body. Internationally there has been the leadership programmes for male and female students of Dammam University, Saudi Arabia. Both of them different and delivered in different locations; as required by their culture, but both being seen as an investment in the future of their students, and the academic health of their universities.

The general and global shift in responsibility for student tuition fee funding from the State to the individual student is having the effect of students becoming more demanding in the amount of information published about the programmes and performance of universities, and the level of service and attention which they expect from their university. It is also serving to cause more students to follow subjects which are more likely to lead more quickly to a well remunerated job.

A combination of the higher fees being charged to students and the growing student voice suggest to me that current and prospective students would benefit from understanding more fully why a university that is run autonomously is likely to provide them with a more complete, vibrant, rounded and stimulating experience, as well as ultimately more seniority in their chosen career.

Leadership and support for leaders

Experience of being Registrar and Secretary of the University of Hull and Secretary at Huddersfield, and from setting up BUiD have enable me to feel at first-hand what leadership of autonomous institutions is like and how important it is to have strong support networks.



It is however from what I have seen regarding the varying missions of universities in (mostly) emerging economies and middle income countries, operating in different contexts; universities having different relationships with their ministries and/or their buffer bodies, from which I will draw most in thinking about how to go forward as Secretary General to prosecute the aim of enlarging the influence of the MCO. The range of different cultures and contexts do indeed make academic autonomy a dynamic project.

During the 'Arab Spring' young people voiced their concerns loudly. 'Youth unemployment', 'inappropriate higher education', 'lack of critical thinking', 'insufficient transparency', 'lack of ability to choose which programmes they want to study and the universities in which they wish to take them', and 'limited availability of university places' were among them and these were voiced in the context of rising aspirations and a growing proportion of the population being under 25 years of age. States responded with administrative reforms, but not always with resources or the conditions that would enable planning with confidence to ensure that the essential conditions for autonomous operation were met.

Further east the pressures arising from ASEAN integration in 2015 are having similar effects on the leaders of HE institutions to be more responsive to the market place.

Globalisation and Internationalisation

Beyond individual regions, advances in IT and the faster pace and more comprehensive nature of globalisation are requiring greater internationalisation on the part of institutions. Universities' strategies vary greatly depending on their mission and strategic plans and include one or both of teaching and research. Recruitment of both faculty and students from other countries is becoming more common, often for a mixture of motives. Teaching in languages other than the national language, and often doing so in a third country. In some countries Higher Education is becoming much more explicitly an economic commodity rather than an intellectual experience that is valuable in its own right.

The scramble to rise up national league tables is seriously influencing the behaviour of some universities although many of these tables contain sufficiently diverse criteria and different weightings to enable most universities pursuing different missions to claim some element of successful performance.

One might think that a league table giving an indication of the level of autonomy exercised and accountability demonstrated by different universities might serve to raise the profile of autonomous operation! But then, given that autonomy is a journey rather than a destination and that the climate and terrain in each country differ, it would be difficult to do this with any credibility.

Leadership Development

As a Registrar I have experienced the full impact of quality assurance schemes. The investment in good systems and training of people to operate them at different levels of the organisations is far more effective than the costs and risks of reputational damage from being found wanting by an external body. Likewise, investment in leadership development is more effective than expenditure on remedying errors and defects from inadequate operations. This experience causes me to think that the MCO might look at the balance of its work to see how its members might be better served in the longer term.



Stakeholders

From conducting leadership development programmes on strategic planning in different countries, the varying significance of different stakeholders is apparent. The extent to which they fund and provide opportunities for universities and the concomitant extent to which universities should be accountable to them clearly needs to be factored into the operation of autonomy.

The MCO relates directly to the signatories of the Universitatum. These institutions are mostly in some kind of relationship with the relevant Ministry or 'buffer body' of their country, a larger global grouping or quality agency. Insofar as national plans for Higher Education are becoming more important the question of what might be done through these bodies may be one that is worth addressing.

The growing private sector, in most countries is generally more concerned with teaching, especially where the bodies are for profit. Conversely, some of the more prestigious universities in the US are legally private sector bodies. In some countries, private forms of ownership are devised to enable universities to operate more autonomously. Even in the UK, with some well-known universities receiving less than 10% of their funding from the State, it is questionable whether they are in practice public or private bodies. The differences between autonomy in practice between the two sectors, if indeed there are only two, may also be worthy of study so that what appears to be effective practice in each might be more widely promulgated.

So what conclusions might we draw which might guide how the MCO develops?

The MCO and I are not going to be idle! The journey is a long and interesting one with much to learn *en route*.

While it is essential to work first and foremost with signatory institutions the needs of their stakeholders need to be understood so that the autonomy which universities have can be developed most effectively and in a way that is most relevant to current and future needs. Universities have been remarkably successful in adapting over the years.

Nationally and globally autonomy is a conversation. I would value your input to that conversation at any time. It obviously draws on experience of the past but also needs visions of the future.

I shall look forward to trying to enable the Observatory to raise its profile, broaden its geographical reach and, through its signatories and supporters, to increase its impact. By so doing the aim will be to enable universities to meet the increasing demands that their stakeholders have of them in a way which does not erode the integrity of their fundamental values.

I shall look forward very much to working with you and the Council of MCO in this quest.

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