



South America: Challenges in promoting Magna Charta Universitatum fundamental principles and values

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1. The two sessions comprised colleagues from Colombia, Romania, Spain, Egypt, Netherlands, Italy and Mexico, and covered three broad themes, addressed via the central perspective of political/public responsiveness and institutional autonomy, namely

- Access and massification
- Students in institutional governance
- University “Third Mission”.

2. Taking Latin American conditions as a starting point, the importance of institutional autonomy was asserted as follows

- as a means of protecting free speech and enquiry, in the cause of democratic ideals and creative innovation
- in terms of freedom to generate funding outside state sources to guarantee institutional discretion where needed
- in relation to freedom to deploy budgets and staff in pursuit of university objectives without being subject to political whim or interference.

Mission differentiation and institutional diversity – a progressively more evident phenomenon in global higher education – goes hand in hand with institutional autonomy.

Access, Opportunity and Massification

3. Increasing access to HE, accompanied by equality of opportunity, is seen as an essential priority for the Latin American university, as it is in the systems represented in the discussions. Whilst the arguments for this are well known, the implications are

- massification, achieved through more institutions, and/or larger institutions, each of which has significant consequences
- whether this results in a substantial increase in private providers (domestic or overseas) and the accreditation, quality, and protectionist issues involved
- questions re. admission of students – who decides (institution or government agency); what are the entry standards and criteria; entry examinations
- changing profile of student populations with various categories of lifelong learner
- the knock-on consequences for basic education, to ensure entrants of sufficient quality
- the resulting changed dynamics of the university itself, especially in relation to conceptions of educational quality.

4. The effect of the above is evident in the ability of the university to determine its own character – which is a fundamental aspect of institutional autonomy.

5. Various devices to cope with/respond to this massification were identified from other systems, including

- the establishment of tertiary institutions to act as intermediaries between schools and universities to bring school leavers up to acceptable entry standards
- the use of such colleges to conduct degrees on a franchise or subordinate relationship with the university; including so-called foundation degrees – regional partnerships
- quotas for state universities
- the use of on-line/open university/MOOC learning/blended learning for expanded provision beyond the campus, to a much larger and diverse student population.

Students in Institutional Governance

6. It is widely agreed that students have a significant role to play in various governance organs – boards of governors or trustees; Senates; Faculty Councils and other committees – in respect of

- the consumer voice
- the use of innovative thinking
- securing subsequent commitment to difficult policy decisions.

7. However, in the Latin American and other contexts, the role of student is essentially political and often a replication of external societal power/party political structures. Their activities often create significant destabilisation. Alliances with external politicians may well create a pincer movement on the university president from above and below, a very ominous phenomenon. This is clearly a threat to institutional autonomy, by extra-legal means.

8. In other systems, notably Northern Europe, North America and Australia, rigorous codes of conduct for good and robust corporate governance exist, which would insist students on governance bodies are primarily and dispassionately concerned with the overall welfare of the whole university, as distinct from the interests of a particular constituency. This affirms the primacy of institutional autonomy.

University “Third Mission”

9. The original Magna Charta emphasised the centrality of the Humboldtian model of the university, and the twin and mutually reinforcing foci of teaching and research in the pursuit of academic excellence. This has undoubtedly been significantly extended – and enriched – by the addition of the “Third Mission”, encompassing research and technology transfer, knowledge exchange with industry, industrial R&D, CPD etc. This is also connected to the concept of the “Knowledge Region”. This is normally a commercial activity undertaken for a particular public or private sector client, which could raise issues of e.g.

- shared control of intellectual property
- possible commercial influence on research findings
- intervention in programme and curriculum development.

The assumption is therefore that Third Stream activity could prove an infringement both of institutional autonomy and academic freedom, in certain cases.



10. Evidence from various systems indicates this may not necessarily be the case, as
- universities are free to decide which activities connected with the “Third Stream” they wish to engage in – an exercise in autonomous decision-making, therefore
 - additional income obtained provides discretionary income sources, apart from government, thus enhancing autonomy
 - such income can be used to provide resources to enrich the quality and sustainability of activities in the academic heartland (research and teaching) and also infrastructural support
 - such innovative activities in the Third Stream e.g. multi-disciplinary research; on-line teaching may be a catalyst for change in mainstream campus based education or research
 - they enhance the credibility and competence of faculty members in professional fields, including consultancy.
11. Nonetheless, it is agreed that the development of Third Stream activities does necessitate robust processes for e.g.
- approval mechanisms
 - risk assessment
 - ethical clearance
 - content of contracts.

to provide necessary safeguards for both freedom and accountability.

“Third Mission” is now normal, and should thus be carefully adopted and managed.

Conclusion

12. It is evident that the conventional domains of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are in need of contextualisation in the new circumstances of 21st Century high education, and the particular conditions in different cultures and HE systems. This discussion has begun to elaborate the potential of such an analysis.