Provision of student support services

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The discussion generally sought to identify the relevance of the *Magna Charta Universitatum* of 1988 with regard to student support services. It was pointed out that the fundamental principles of the Magna Charta, i.e. university autonomy, the inseparability of teaching and research, and freedom in research and training, were also to be attained through ensuring students' freedoms. The Magna Charta describes this as follows:

> *Each university must – with due allowance for particular circumstances – ensure that its students' freedoms are safeguarded, and that they enjoy concessions in which they can acquire the culture and training which it is their purpose to possess.*

It was agreed that an environment in which students' freedoms were guaranteed was one that also adequately attended to offering student support services of a high quality.

The host as an expert on the topic of student support services explained that all student support services in universities should be designed in such a manner as to attempt to communicate the fundamental values of the *Magna Charta Universitatum* to students.

Student support services comprise one or more departments or divisions of services and support for students at institutions of higher education that operate to enhance student growth and development.

The areas of support services usually included are the following:

☐ academic services,
☐ admissions, enrolment, financial aid and orientation,
☐ support to students during their first semester or year, first year experience (FYE),
☐ alumni,
☐ campus life (safety, student activities, students' union),
☐ study counselling, study advice and career services,
☐ sports, health, recreation and wellness,
☐ diversity, disability support and inclusion,
☐ international student services, and
☐ residence life.

Within student services it is becoming common to establish a "student house", which brings together many different "functions" of support and services to students. Internationally one speaks of "one-stop shops", i.e. places (physical or virtual) where students can find all relevant information in one place.

The service functions that are regularly included in the term "student services" may, for example, be a service desk for students visiting the campus, academic and career counselling, or providing answers to students' questions via telephone, e-mail or skype. The types of services often offered in addition to supplying answers to various study-related issues encompass support to students with disabilities, language workshop, student health activities, supporting students' unions and computer support. At many universities alumni activities are also included.

Students attending the discussion commented on where they perceived shortcomings in student support services to exist. It was mentioned that in some universities the provision of services to students was the responsibility of different units/centres, services being compartmentalised according to the nature of the service rendered, making it sometimes difficult to find "the right person" to address. It was suggested that it would be better if support services were offered by a single comprehensive facility (if necessary with different sections), so as to only have one initial contact point.

Another problem encountered at times was that the support staff in some universities were fluent only in the local language with an insufficient command of English. Students engaging in the debate felt the need for an enhanced focus on the provision of "second stage support", i.e. the provision of services following the initial stages of "integration" in a new university setting. In particular, the following were mentioned:

☐   sustained support for students with disabilities,
☐   "cross-cultural workshops" to help students become better acquainted with the local culture, traditions and conventions,
☐   the provision of a mentor to each student during the first year of study, and
☐   courses teaching the local language.

Some students raised the point that student support services, though often perfect "on paper", did not operate smoothly in practice because they were hierarchical in conception, conceiving of students as "clueless" subjects, who were merely to be provided with certain written/down-loadable information, whereas they should rather make support relevant by notably employing "students to help student". It was pointed out that in some universities there was a firm opposition on the part of staff against engaging students more proactively in the provision of student support services. Further, focusing specifically on career counselling, it was mentioned that guidance in this respect was offered only in the last year of a degree in some universities, whereas it should be provided already in the penultimate year.

Addressing the question as to whether student support services could generally be provided at a higher level of quality by ensuring sufficient resources were available to this end by making students pay more for their university education and by considering them to be "customers" of higher education (entitled to be "treated well"), the response from students was a resolute rejection of this idea. Adopting the "student as customer" notion would jeopardise higher education as a public good and would, more in particular, make the attainment of the ideals of the Magna Charta much more difficult, if not impossible.

Although mainly students took part in the discussion, there were also some higher education administrators (such as rectors) participating in the debate. It was reported that in some African universities student participation in student support services occurred at a very high level. In Europe, however, there appeared to be a trend for many students not to become involved in this respect. Although administrators had a keen interest in mobilising students to participate more actively, this has proven unsuccessful in many instances. It was felt that this was an important aspect deserving further consideration, so as to facilitate developing strategies that could usefully be applied in enhancing the extent to which students become involved in volunteering work benefiting the university community.