**UNIVERSITY VALUES IN A CHANGING WORLD**

**On the way towards a revised version of the Magna Charta Universitatum**

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**The Magna Charta Universitatum:**

**The original aims and the outcomes: retrospective from authors**

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The conception and effective realisation of the *Magna Charta Universitatum*, with the support of the leading Universities of the world, was the outcome of a period starting in the 1960s (nineteen-sixties) characterised by the involvement of the European institutions in a series of extremely positive actions, the most important of which was the Erasmus Project.

As a result, it was in a particularly dynamic and creative period for the European Universities that the *Magna Charta* was established also in the context beyond Europe, immediately playing an authoritative role.

This is important from the historical point of view, since the *Charta* was effectively adopted as a document drafted by the European Universities, and initially only European Universities were represented on the Committee that approved it,[[1]](#footnote-1) after extensive discussion, taking account of the fact that in order for it to be signed, it would have to be approved by the governing bodies of the Universities taking part.

The drafting of the *Magna Charta Universitatum* took almost a year, but the number of Universities offering their support was greater than expected, with no objections raised by the international academic community.

Over the past 30 years, hundreds of other Universities have adhered, perhaps too many in terms of numbers and importance, due to the fact that in many cases these Universities are dedicated mainly to awarding vocational qualifications of an extremely specialised nature, and this could be considered to be in conflict with the very concept of the University.

The Committee was well aware of the need for appropriate criteria for determining which higher education institutions were entitled to take part. This gave rise to the adoption of an expression that is both proper and useful, the expression “true University” (Preamble, clause 1), to determine whether an application should be approved or not. At the same time, it is to some extent inadequate, since it can be interpreted in a manner that is too elastic, giving rise to unrealistic expectations.

The main question concerns the difficulty of properly identifying the characteristics of “true” Universities. As already mentioned, one of the fundamental points of the document concerns the fact that teaching and research are inseparable: the connection between teaching and research is a fundamental principle of the model of higher education that has been handed down to us.

However, in the present state of affairs, it appears to be much more difficult than in the past to classify certain institution as “true” Universities, even though they are innovative and important. Higher education institutions in which teaching and research should go hand-in-hand have become increasingly complex and extremely diversified and unequal, to the point that they cannot be identified with just one model.

This is a crucial matter. In general, institutions of higher education should be allowed to sign the *Magna Charta* only if they possess the characteristics of the *Universitas*. The evaluation of these institutions should be carried out by means of proper monitoring by the academic community giving birth to the *Magna Charta Observatory*, founded in 2000 at the University of Bologna with the support of the European University Association.

By means of the interaction between the Rectors of the Universities signing the *Magna Charta*, the Observatory is able to monitor the respect for the principles of the *Magna Charta,* and intervene to guarantee the integrity of intellectual, teaching and scientific programmes, with the aim of reinforcing the relationship of trust between the Universities and their reference communities. In this connection, it should be noted that an Admission Policy has now been adopted, that since 2016 (two thousand and sixteen) has regulated the procedure for the admission of higher education institutions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

It may be argued that our work was marked by a certain degree of ingenuity, since we did not lay down significant limits to define true Universities.

Insufficient attention was paid to the risk, that in many countries and Universities turned out to be well founded, associated with the continuous and instrumental evolution of disciplines claiming to be vocational in nature, which young people often prefer. These disciplines are often characterised by a creativity that is short-lived, and are also subject to an extremely rapid turnover, giving rise to risks for the quality of higher education programmes, that are held hostage to transient needs, and in any case to an evolution that is too rapid. This prevents an in-depth analysis of problems, while paying insufficient attention to the need for an assessment over time.

The uncontrolled proliferation of on-line universities has made the situation all the more difficult, with programmes that are lacking in substance that take a significant amount of resources and students away from “true” Universities.

All of this is part of a tendency that is now evident, above all in the higher social classes: to prefer higher education programmes focusing at an early stage on a limited range of topics that are attractive in vocational terms, to enable young people to conclude in as short a time as possible studies and experiences that are considered to be essential or useful for the award of the final degree. However, I wish to underline that pressure is applied for the period of study to be reduced for the benefit of business, that can be a valid interlocutor only on conditions that have not yet been clearly defined.

This kind of higher education, that may be of benefit for business,­ but certainly not for young people, pays little attention to problems of a general nature. Particularly for the scientific faculties, it pays limited attention to the need to develop teaching and basic research in the discipline.

Moreover, there is no doubt that a concept of higher education that enables graduates to operate within a narrow range of action, in many cases with specialised technological equipment that is continually evolving, while providing in a short time professional skills that are lucrative, justifies (or rather safeguards) extremely high tuition fees, and this is likely to be detrimental to the system as a whole.

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The *Magna Charta* is almost an ethical legitimation of the “European space for culture” that today is defined as the product of centuries of historical development.

At the same time, the dissemination of knowledge in the world beyond Europe is a fundamental element of globalization.

But this cannot take place without rules based on an awareness of the problems.

In particular, I refer to recruitment on the part of Universities aiming to attract the best students, that promote, or even impose, a degree of conditioning in favour of choices that can more easily lead, by means of a guaranteed University qualification, to a mutual obligation between the student and the University, taking as its primary objective the achievement of prestigious professional positions.

I refer here mainly to the fact that this approach that we can define as vocational, tends to relegate research in general, and in particular basic research, to an ancillary or instrumental role, rather than confirming it as the rationale for the existence of the University.

In addition, we need to bear in mind that access to the leading Universities is often the prerogative of students from wealthy families, and much more rarely of those in receipt of student grants. As a result, higher education is becoming prohibitively expensive for all the others.

The objective that is increasingly evident, regardless of whether it is reasonable or not, is that the amount of time allocated to higher education should be reduced. Considering that the connection between university research in the traditional sense of the term and applied research with a subsequent transfer to business tends to become the main objective to pursue, there is clearly a need for a greater awareness of the importance and delicacy of this question.

But higher education cannot be confined to this role and function, even in the case of one single University. If this were the case, it would be more useful and fairer to the system as a whole to set up private research institutions, without a teaching mission.

Underlying the idea and meaning of the term “University” there is a need for breadth and harmony that must take as its objective the gradual development of all the disciplines.

It is important not to neglect, but rather to analyse, clarify and disseminate among young people the principle that Universities promote critical research not only with a view to selling vocational skills, but with a view to engaging young people, potentially all young people, in the process of acquiring and creating knowledge.

In this connection, young people need to be placed in a position in which they can gain an awareness of their own individual levels of knowledge. This would be a useful means also for enabling them to choose programmes that will lead them to a wide range of professional activities.

It is in this context that the original concept of the University community, that has developed over the centuries and is clearly defined in the *Magna Charta,* can continue to express the values of a community, provided that it can come to terms with the needs of present-day society. The continuing validity of the relations between the European Universities, confirmed by the Bologna Declaration,[[3]](#footnote-3) that in operational terms is represented by the European Higher Education Area, is the source of a continuity of actions of the European academic institutions, giving content to a reality that is now consolidated.

From Paris in 1998 to Bologna in 1999, to Prague and Bergen in 2001 and 2005, London and Bucharest in 2007 and 2012, the European Higher Education Area has demonstrated its existence and consistency, as recognised by the European Parliament with Resolution 2011/2180 of 13 March 2012, aiming to promote and consolidate the implementation of the reforms envisaged.

1. The Committee established in Bologna consisted of the President of the European University Association, Carmine Romanzi, along with Professors Giuseppe Caputo; Josep Bricall, Rector of the University of Barcelona; Fabio Roversi-Monaco, Rector of the University of Bologna; Roger Dillemans, of the Catholic University of Louvain; Hans Van Ginkel, Rector of the University of Utrecht; Jacques Soppelsa, Rector of the University of Paris-Sorbonne, and Manuel Nunez Encabo, representing the European Union. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.magna-charta.org/resources/files/2016PolicyforWebsite.pdf>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Signed in Bologna on 19 June 1999 by the Ministers of Higher Education of 29 European countries. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)