

Magna Charta Anniversary, October 2019

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Last November António Guterres, Secretary General of the United Nations, addressed the Security Council on the importance of what he called “Networked, inclusive multilateralism.” “This is a time of multiplying conflicts, advancing climate change, deepening inequality and rising tensions over trade,” he wrote,

It is a period when people are moving across borders in unprecedented numbers in search of safety or opportunity. We are still wrestling with the risk of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction — and only beginning to reckon with the potential dangers of new technologies.

There is anxiety, uncertainty and unpredictability across the world. Trust is on the decline, within and among nations. People are losing faith in political establishments — national and global. Key assumptions have been upended, key endeavours undermined and key institutions undercut.

It often seems that the more global the threat, the less able we are to cooperate.

That last observation Guterres made despite taking note of some recent positive developments: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change, for example. In a context where such agreements are few and often highly contested, therefore,

we need to inspire a return to international cooperation. We need a reformed, reinvigorated and strengthened multilateral system.

In the end, multilateralism is nothing more than countries coming together, respecting one another, and establishing the forms of cooperation that guarantee peace and prosperity for all on a healthy planet. Towards that end, we need stronger commitment to a rules-based order We need new forms of cooperation with other international and regional organizations — a networked multilateralism. And we need closer links with civil society and other stakeholders — an inclusive multilateralism.¹

¹ 9 November 2018. <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2018-11-09/secretary-generals-remarks-security-council-open-debate>

History would suggest that such things are more likely to come about in the aftermath of a disintegrated world-order, rather than as a bulwark against it. The League of Nations (1920), the United Nations (1945), the World Bank (1945), the OECD (1961), and the International Criminal Court (2002): all of these are the gift, in one way or another, of geopolitical and internecine conflicts, genocide, and global economic catastrophe, their founding a tragically belated recognition of the interdependence and interconnectedness of all nations and all peoples. I read last year's speech by UN Secretary-General Guterres to be a plea to the world that we for once avoid being ironic victims of our own history.

The Magna Charta Observatory came into being in 1998 as a similar attempt to get ahead of the tide of history. While the Magna Charta Universitatum—the original document signed in 1988—was a clear avatar of post-war multilateralism in Europe, a positive step, in the sphere of higher education, towards the formation of the European Union at Maastricht in 1992, ten years later it was apparent that potentially countervailing forces were at work. Whereas the Magna Charta Universitatum evinced confidence in the existence of what has been called a “Europe of the minds, . . . a Europe that simply needed to be unveiled in order for its existence to be recognised,” rapid social and political change in the intervening years—including the collapse of the Berlin Wall—made any broad, multinational consensus about the nature, function and values of universities questionable at least: “the new political situation of an open territory (in which national borders were less and less important) called for constant analysis of the changes affecting academia, from within or from without, as the relevance of old references was being questioned by the sheer speed and extent of social transformations in the region.”² The Magna Charta Observatory was founded, then, to monitor and give advice on the health and effectiveness of universities in the context of far-reaching change. The signatories that comprise the Observatory in that sense represent the kind of networked and inclusive multilateralism that was called for by António Guterres, safeguarding the world's universities not for their own sake and perpetuation, but for the good of society across the world and in their own communities. Although that last notion—that universities exist to serve the public good—has become increasingly important since the turn of the millennium, it was always there in the wording of the Magna Charta Universitatum.

Furthermore, that higher education should serve the public good was one of the ideas that opened participation in the Magna Charta to institutions outside of Europe. While declaring that universities were the product of the European Humanist tradition, the Magna Charta did assume a much broader global relevance for itself, though not altogether modestly or without cultural chauvinism. The “undersigned rectors of European universities proclaim to all states and to the conscience of the Nations,” it asserted, “the fundamental principles which must, now and always, support the vocation of universities.” At the same time, however, the first fundamental principle enunciated noted that societies within which

² <http://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum/history>

universities are situated are inevitably “differently organized because of geography and historical heritage.” In that language there was an implicit acknowledgement of the importance of local circumstance, notwithstanding the emphasis in the document on principles that purportedly transcend time and place. It also needs to be noted that those transcendent principles were said to derive their value from their relationship to the social or communal good.

For that reason, it is no surprise that close to 900 institutions from 90 countries have now signed the Magna Charta. The framers of the document were correct to point out that the future of communities “depends largely on cultural, scientific and technical development,” and where in the world would communities not seek to develop institutions of higher learning to help them achieve their goals? And why would they not wish those institutions to be built upon principles and values that have proven themselves over nearly a millennium: institutional autonomy, the inseparability of teaching and research, freedom in research and training, rejection of intolerance, and a commitment to dialogue as the path to knowledge?

Until recently, these would have seemed to be merely rhetorical questions. Unfortunately, as was confirmed in 2016 when the phrase “post-truth” was chosen as the Oxford English Dictionary’s Word of the Year, we can no longer safely assume that societies and the governments that represent them place a high premium on the pursuit and possession of knowledge. In a world of post-truth politics, the very idea of respectful debate that leads to deeper understanding—that cornerstone of university culture and practice—is potentially irrelevant, at least to the way in which communities define themselves and imagine themselves developing. Tom Nicols summed up this dispiriting situation in his 2017 book, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign Against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*.³ I shall not summarize the argument because, as guardians of “established knowledge,” we in the universities perhaps know more about that campaign than anyone else. But for me, our current malaise was perfectly expressed in that now infamous observation by Michael Gove, incredibly a former British Secretary of State for Education, “I think the people in this country have had enough of experts.”

In other countries and at other times, I would suggest, politicians would say they cannot get enough expertise for nation-building. It is that more normal scenario that has brought institutions together under the banner of the Magna Charta over the last 31 years. These signing ceremonies have been emblematic points in an optimistic and aspirational process, as institutions one by one have sought to affirm the best values of higher education and, by extension, to realize those values in day-to-day activities on their campuses. The Living Values Project, undertaken by the Magna Charta Observatory in recent years, is the natural outgrowth of this process and one of the ways in which we are making real the idea of a global academy, the product of a scholarly, networked and inclusive multilateralism of the sort espoused by the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

³ Oxford University Press.

Remember that Guterres posited a reinvigorated and strengthened multilateral system as our only hope against current global ferment; and since an important contributor to that ferment is the potent “post-truth” bacterium (the campaign against established knowledge, as Tom Nicols called it), academic alliances across national boundaries have acquired global importance. They are in fact critical to the future of all people and of the planet, and any act like the signing of the Magna Charta—any act which expresses a pan-global consensus on the critical importance of unfettered learning and discovery—is a blow against ignorance and the damage it can do. It is furthermore a specific and pointed rejection of tribalism and chauvinistic nationalism.

These are perhaps rather grandiose claims to make for the mere act of signing a document that is 31 years old and was, after all, originally drafted in Latin—not a language for the future, to put it mildly. It is however not too much to claim for a document that has been translated into approximately fifty languages, and which, despite its specifically European origins and framing, has found resonance around the world. Its authors did of course say that they—the Rectors of European universities—were addressing themselves “to the conscience of all nations,” but even so I wonder whether they actually envisaged doing so in Kazak, Uzbek or Azeri. Without questioning the honest conviction that gave rise to the declaration we have signed today, but recognizing nevertheless that as academics we must always be half-expecting to be proven wrong, I wonder whether those original signatories would find themselves a little surprised that their hypothesis on the values and principles that should underpin universities is still holding, indeed attracting more and more endorsements every year! Having signed the Magna Charta several years ago on behalf of our host institution, I am especially proud to have been able to sign today on behalf of Queen’s University, of which I am privileged to be the present Principal and Vice-Chancellor, and to have done so in the company of distinguished colleagues from around the world.

I suggested that participation in the Living Values Project—a process “to enable universities across the world to define, achieve engagement with and live effectively in accordance with their values” (MCO website)—is the appropriate step for institutions to take beyond merely signing the Magna Charta. But what about the Magna Charta itself, thirty-one years on? Although the document proclaims that certain principles transcend time and national borders, the very second of the principles enumerated focuses on change and on the function of universities in addressing change. Teaching and research must go hand-in-hand, we are told, if education “is not to lag behind changing needs, the demands of society, and advances in scientific knowledge.”

Those last three things—changing needs, the demands of society, and advances in scientific knowledge—taken together with the fact that the Magna Charta Universitatum is now “owned” by the trans-national academy that it sought to create, mean that the time is right to reformulate the declaration for its next thirty years. You will all know that, following a decision by the Council of the Magna Charta Observatory, work began a year ago to do just that. I am pleased to be a member of the working group charged with the task. Because elsewhere in the conference program you have had a chance to discuss what is being proposed I will not dwell on it here. I will merely note that while the 1988 declaration

emphasized the various dimensions of *freedom* that must define a university, in 2019 across the globe there is increasing weight placed on the *responsibilities* of our institutions. That is not to say that academic freedoms are regarded as any less definitive of universities in the 21st Century, but rather that freedom is understood to be a prerequisite of sorts: that without which our institutions would be unable effectively to discharge their responsibilities to the societies in which they are embedded and the greater global community of which they are understood to be an integral part.

Last year Stephen M. Gavazzi and E. Gordon Gee published a book called *Land-Grant Universities for the Future: Higher Education for the Public Good*,⁴ which argued that Land-Grant Universities in the United States (institutions founded with the specific purpose of bringing benefit to their immediate communities) needed to rediscover their original mission of service and responsibility. In a Foreword to the book, Peter Magrath wrote that “universities that are not engaged with their communities in the twenty-first century will soon find themselves disengaged from any meaningful relevance to the citizenry of the United States.” Although in the first instance directed at Land-Grant universities in the US, Magrath’s point was intended to have more general application, and I think it captures very well the mood of our own time and in many countries around the world. The expectation is that universities shall be engaged with their communities in active ways, fostering social justice and equity not only by modeling those things but by being agents of change, contributing to the prosperity of communities not merely by residing in them but by cultivating talent and fostering entrepreneurship, advancing the future of humanity and our planet by encouraging the highest quality basic and applied research, and working to preserve and strengthen cultural diversity.

In the most recent draft of the Magna Charta Universitatum 2020, therefore, it is noted *inter alia* that “Universities accept that they have a responsibility to be in solidarity with and responsive to the aspirations and challenges of the world they serve,” that they “embrace their duty to teach and to undertake research with integrity, producing reliable and trustworthy results,” and that “they are part of a global, collegial network of scientific enquiry and scholarship, building on shared bodies of knowledge and contributing to their further development.” They also acknowledge that “individuals and communities may, for lack of economic or political power, have difficulty gaining access to higher education or influencing the modes and matter of academic study.”

At a time like ours, when ignorance consorts with power increasingly across the globe, that there should be solidarity amongst universities—that they should support one another in upholding the value and advancing the impact of sound research, that they should challenge young minds to question received wisdom, and that they should be protected from interference in doing so—is of the utmost importance and urgency. As signatories of the Magna Charta Universitatum we are united in that cause, not for reasons that set us apart from society, but for considerations that bind us inextricably to society and the future of our planet

⁴ Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.