

Magna Charta Observatory Annual Conference

Hamilton, Canada

University Freedoms and Responsibilities: Responding to the Challenges of the Future

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The Magna Charta Observatory (MCO) Annual Conference, with the theme: “University Freedoms and Responsibilities: Responding to the Challenges of the Future” was held on October 16th and 17th 2019 at the McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada. I was present as a student representative from Croatia, and I can say that the conference has exceeded my expectations. Among the participants, I have had an opportunity to meet some familiar faces from the celebration of 20 years of Bologna process, but also some new faces, which were mostly rectors, vice-rectors and students from different European countries. There was also a student rector present, which I found interesting and she was inspirational as a student representative in her function. The atmosphere of the event was very welcoming, and it was easy to contact our hosts, but also to converse with them, suggest topics, actively contribute to the conversations and give feedback on the work of the experts.

As a student, I can give only positive opinions on the conference, as every participant has been politely greeted, introduced and given an opportunity to speak up and be active, through the rich program with respectable speakers. It was great to see that in each session, there was a topic dedicated to the students (not only the representatives but the entire student community). Although students need time to become experts in topics of specific interest to the high- ranking representatives in higher education, it was easy to engage in every topic, as students were frequently asked their opinions and invited to comment from their point of view.

Not many students applied as participants at the event, but I am sure that as the years go by, students will recognize more the quality of such an event. It is commendable that MCO offers students the cover of the travel costs, which is very important considering students` limited budget. The National Union of Students of the United Kingdom was a holder of one of the workshops, which proves that the students can lead in different fields of academic community with their knowledge if given proper support, time and if they put in a collective effort for the benefit of it.

As it was stated in the introduction of the event, there are almost 1000 Universities who have signed the Magna Charta Universitatum and have obliged themselves to follow and respect the same principles of work, which is a global victory and contributes to standardization of education. However, Universities still have to work on assuring the availability of higher education to all, in accordance with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and work more actively towards inclusivity and diversification of the student population. As student mentality grows more conscious for the questions of minorities, immigrants and social injustice, Universities are pushed towards assuring both the absence of the public expressions of hatred towards minorities and immigrants; the equality of students and sustainable quality for students from all backgrounds. Freedom of speech is critical in the assurance of inclusion but all groups must be equally represented in public in order to create a wholesome representation of a diversified academic community. Students` representative bodies must not be seen as enemies in this process of advancement, even if their approach is more aggressive, but should instead be made crucial partners in development,

inclusion, and internationalization. They should, above all, be rid of the pressure from political parties and media, and should independently advocate for the students' rights, with the support and encouragement from universities. Universities hold the responsibility of enhancing social equality through active engagement in a community. The role of the modern universities steps out from only educational and scientific area, into the economic and social dimension of the local and regional community. Unemployability, brain- drain, high difference between the social layers and drop in the number of residents can be improved significantly with the change in local economy, and universities can be the bearers of change by active engagement and change of orientation from internationalization or teaching and learning as a focus to industrial and economic growth. From the development of Universities, the local community can grow and some goals like the ones mentioned before will be improved as a result of economic and social welfare. High importance is placed on the sustainability of modern universities to provide a future for all citizens and the academic community. Science, art and quality of education can blossom in the modern, economically independent higher- education institution, and can progress far beyond the economic situation, by assuring collection of ideas from the community and their implementation. For me, this model seemed a bit different from the models European universities have built, but looking at the examples from the McMaster University, I cannot deny the results of the economy- driven university vision.

I liked the workshop: "The role of representative student associations, current challenges, and strategies in response", as it made everyone think of what types of students' representation bodies there are, how do the students differ from country to country, what are the obstacles they encounter and how do they solve them. Some of the conclusions we came to are that students' representative bodies should always be politics-free and independent, but they are often seen as undesirable partners from the point of view of different stakeholders, which must improve! The effectiveness of the student representation differs greatly with the amount of freedom each body has (for example independent student organizations holding legal entities tend to be more effective than those who do not), but as we found out, effectiveness sometimes comes from the personal interactions of stakeholders with student representatives. It is imperative that students' representation bodies are included in every aspect of higher- education concerning students' matters without personal connotations, to assure objectivity and sincerity of the processes. It is clear that students' protests are one of the most effective ways of student- action but that should be the last resort, after all of the negotiations with higher education stakeholders fail. Unfortunately, increasing numbers of student protests show that the student voice is still not equal and taken into account as it should be. We heard great examples from the United Kingdom, Canada, Ireland, Sweden, Denmark (...) and other countries where students are active participants in all the matters of students' interest, with their voice being the one listened to the most, but for most countries, this is unfortunately still not a reality. The administrative staff is of the utmost importance to students' representatives, as they help them in their everyday duties, and their effort is highly appreciated. One of the most important factors that influences the effectiveness of student representation is said to be support, and I think we should not stop investing in students' representation and providing the stated, until the only limiting factor is the imagination of the students themselves.

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