Table 1
Student perspectives on principles, values and responsibilities of universities: focussing on academic freedom, institutional democracy and ethical research

Host: Sherine Omondi (Global Student Forum)
Rapporteur: Julie Sanders (Royal Holloway, University of London)

Our session focussed on the student experience with a focus on the particularities of PhD students who frequently find themselves on a borderline between student and early career colleague and often feel they fall between gaps in institutional thinking and policy making as a result. The framework for the conversation was around financial resourcing models, academic freedom and the category of independent research as well as the concept of ethical research. We were fortunate in all three of our sessions to have a blend of established academic and student voices (ranging from undergraduate to postgraduate) and of Global South and Global North perspectives. It was a living lab of the ideas presented in the morning keynote by Professor Sibongile Muthwa (Nelson Mandela University) of "tapping into the agency of students themselves" and what the sessions also made very clear was the wide range of contexts and conditions, from funding and access to educational support, to resources to the status of PG students in the academic community and workplace.

We discussed the ways in which academic freedom can be interpreted to both the benefit and detriment of any postgraduate research community. Students felt subject to the demands of teams, principal investigators, and also the boards and decision makers sitting behind funded research. They stressed their need to have freedom to explore, to be curious and choose challenging areas of research; and their need to feel the backing of their institutions for this in contexts where there might be resistance to certain topics of research. Institutional support (and the varying degrees to which it was felt to be available) was a recurring theme in our discussions – recognising the asymmetries of power postgraduates experience, we discussed, for example, the particular precarities of indigenous and First Nation students, & of those working in contexts and countries where there might be an extractive approach to research (deploying students as "data"); as well as precarities of finance and tenure.

It was clear that institutions globally approached the issue of status for postgraduate students within the organisation very differently. Many recognised PhD students as early career colleagues but it was recognised there were pros and cons to this; we explored duty of care versus respecting students as adults with decision making powers. We also discussed different national contexts, hearing from some countries where undergraduates as well as postgraduates were frequently mature students and/or students with families and different relational understandings this requires. Some constructive suggestions were made around global resource sharing for postgraduate researchers from sharing of labs to mentoring networks and collaborative doctoral programmes but there was recognition that these needed to be founded in an equitable way or working to avoid the Global North extractive models mentioned above.

The table discussion touched on the different development of approaches to ethical research and the use of ethical research committees and approval processes in different countries and contexts. Some emerging national universities observed that

they had no ethics policies or committees and were reliant on policies from other countries to inform their work. Some students felt such processes were a barrier to their independent research and academic freedom; others simply observed that these structures and systems were hard to navigate and understand so there is clearly more we could do to share and enable our student communities in this context.

We discussed some stark differences and challenges around funding for students; some countries had strong national government scholarship arrangements but timelines for delivery could be frustrating and impact the students in negative ways. Several talked about the issues of "return" on those investments with retention of students in country a real issue (recognising the need to balance the risks of losing students to other countries and HE positions on the one hand and the importance of global mobility and exchange on the other (we touched on brain drains; diminishing pipelines; the lure of industrial salaries); in some contexts, self-funded students felt undervalued by comparison with those with research council/scholarship funding; different kinds of inequalities therefore need to be taken into account

Useful discussion was held as to how to encourage students unfamiliar with research into the possibilities of future academic research and careers to shore up the pipeline of quality research; some good examples were where undergraduate scholarships were provided to enable students summer placements to work alongside researchers in labs, studios and in the field – some positive examples especially where they stretched across the full range of disciplines and were not restricted to STEM subjects at the expense of humanities and social sciences. It is worth notin the genuine anxiety expressed by students and academic colleagues alike about the precarity of humanities research at this time. Perhaps a topic for the Magna Charta community to return to in more depth at a future event?

Some overall recommendations from our sessions:

- We can no longer claim that universities are just about knowledge as our networked age means people can access knowledge differently. We need therefore to think holistically about the kind of global citizens we are enabling through higher research and study.

- Those of us in senior leadership roles should strive to stay connected to students through teaching or research supervision or other mechanisms for coproduction and listening to the student voice. We heard some best practice examples of use of student boards, talent development programmes etc and of giving students access to stakeholders internally and externally. There may be opportunities within Magna Charta for sharing of these best practice examples and for sharing across institutions of different sizes and scales.

- Ethical research (and ethical funding for that research) is a concern that needs surfacing and discussing with our students. Many would welcome better training for research students in ethics and research integrity and help with navigating the ethical committee structures and legal requirements in our universities. There is genuine concern from the student body about how we ensure sustainable and ethical research in the future when Higher Education

is facing increasing financial challenges. This is a topic we should continue to debate within our network and to set high standards around.