

Table 12

MCO Research Strategy: setting the agenda with universities

Host: Giga Zedania, Chair of the MCO Research Committee

Rapporteur: Julia Berruezo, Magna Charta Research Assistant

The idea of the World Café sessions was to allow a deeper level of proximity between the hosts and the participants, favouring increased engagement and a richer discussion about the topics. In the specific case of table 12, the topic of conversation was the newly created research committee of the Magna Charta Observatory, which had, at that time, appointed the first research assistant. During almost 1h30 of conversation, participants from different universities passed by the table. Participants were from Switzerland, Ukraine, Turkey, Italy, Estonia, Poland, and Macedonia. Like all the other round tables, the conversations took place in three different groups meeting for 45 minutes each. It is interesting to point out how, despite dealing with the same topic, the conversations took very different directions depending on who was present at the time.

In all three sessions, the conversation began with an introduction by the host, Dr. Giga Zedania, former Rector of Ilia State University in Georgia, and an invitation to the others to introduce themselves. Dr. Zedania then continued by presenting the preliminary design of the MCO research strategy, as well as the objectives and how it is envisaged that other universities may take part.

As presented by Dr. Zedania, the concepts of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are topics already widely discussed by researchers within academia. Therefore, concentrating the committee's efforts solely on these research topics could be repetitive and counter-productive. Thus, the topic 'The Responsive and Responsible University' was chosen as the central theme of the MCO research project. With this shift in focus, it is expected that MCO will contribute to the discussions in the area, engaging universities in this particular theme and identifying existing discussions. The choice for this theme is also justified by the recognition of the role, locally, nationally, and internationally, universities play in society and the connection of responsibility and responsiveness with the fundamental principles described in the MCU.

As described by Dr. Zedania, the research committee intends to develop empirical and normative research. The project, through bibliographical research, seeks to understand the practices already done in this area, collecting ideas and examples worldwide and identifying both successful practices and shortcomings. Some of the questions that the research intends to answer are: What are the critical aspects of responsibilities? What do responsibilities consist of? How to organize joint initiatives? What is being done by the universities? How to engage the stakeholders?

The comments from those present at the table were very diverse. All commended the initiative and showed interest in contributing in any way possible. During the conversations, some points were brought up concerning the relationship between financial freedom and autonomy, interdisciplinarity, problems with university autonomy, the importance of student participation, and cases of specific projects already developed in their universities.

The matter of universities' finances was a topic often brought up at the table. Some of the participants pointed out the difficulties for universities to have autonomy in the context of financial dependence on governments or other entities. In connection to the financial matter, there was a brief discussion regarding the individual autonomy of researchers around the world due to how research proposals, search for funding, and general support are handled nowadays. As discussed, some topics often take

precedence over other topics, there are language barriers, among other facts thus compromising the researcher's decisions and possibilities to engage in a project. Moreover, it was mentioned that research of an interdisciplinary nature suffers, particularly more, since the fields on the forms and the selection committees are often not prepared to be inclusive.

In addition, some concerns were raised regarding countries that still face more widespread problems of university autonomy. Around the world, there are many scholars displaced because of their work that need support and shelter, and this is not limited to people engaged in social science studies. At this point, the work of Scholars at Risk and the importance of the Index of violation of academic freedom were cited and questions regarding the possibility of interference of MCO in this scenario were brought up.

This discussion raised the curiosity of some of the participants regarding the existence of a budget from MCO to support universities interested in participating in the research project.

The issue of interdisciplinarity was another point discussed by the participants of this table when mentioning topics of research interest, especially those related to the environment and migration. There was a common understanding that many of the problems faced by societies, due to their complexity, should be reflected in an interdisciplinary way. Therefore, the suggestion is that the approach of the MCO research committee should also be interdisciplinary. Furthermore, it was suggested that there should be a connection between the research and the goals contained in Agenda 2030 and a collaboration between different individuals from different regions of the world.

The valorisation of students and young people was also a topic mentioned by the participants, who suggested seeking the engagement of undergraduate and graduate students in research through projects and theses. Moreover, the discussion of themes related to the responsibility of universities towards society and autonomy. An example was given of a project carried out at the University of Padova in Italy, where students have classes and readings on academic freedom, how to collaborate, report writing, and public speaking.

Finally, regarding the discussion at the table about responsibility, the main interpretation was that the responsibility of universities is intrinsically related to staying true to academic values and being responsible for the students.