

It is my duty and pleasure to report to you on the activities of the Magna Charta Observatory from the desk of the Secretary General.

The last year has seen an increase in the number of issues being faced by universities regarding autonomy and academic freedom and other challenges. There has been more interaction with signatories than I can remember. We have made significant progress in the implementation of the MCO's 2020 – 2025 strategy. As we learn from the experience of the pandemic and the heightened awareness of the climate emergency, we have developed different ways of doing things. We have welcomed and enjoyed more support from our signatories and from the international bodies with which we cooperate.

Some challenges to university autonomy and academic freedom have hit the headlines; Belarus, Turkey, Hong Kong, the US and the UK for example. Others continue below the radar. Sometimes the MCO makes public statements. Sometimes it writes privately. Sometimes it works quietly with affected universities, always trying to enable universities to operate autonomously and provide academic freedom while not exacerbating the situation, particularly for signatory universities or their leaders or members of their staff. Occasionally it will organise meetings, virtually of late, so that key messages can be heard and understood more widely. Occasionally members of staff of signatory universities write to draw our attention to what they believe to be short-comings in their university's adherence to the principles which they signed up in the Magna Charta Universitatum. All are responded to. Advice is given and many are either resolved or dropped.

The MCO was very pleased to be invited to give evidence to the Bologna Follow-up Group's review of academic freedom in February. Taking place over two days, the MCO was one of a handful of international bodies participating and we look forward this work being taking forward. The MCO has also collaborated with the Central European University's Global Observatory on Academic Freedom in a webinar and that collaboration continues at our Anniversary event. It has provided assistance to the Association of Arab Universities which is in the process of considering a Magna Charta for Arab universities. It was pleased to take a part in delivering the 2022 Global Forum 'Higher Education Leadership for Democracy, Sustainability and Social Justice' in Dublin in June. The decision of Scholars at Risk to make a presentation to the Secretary General of the MCO 'in recognition of outstanding dedication to protecting at-risk scholars and promoting academic freedom' was much appreciated.

Following the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it was with much sadness that the Governing Council of the MCO temporarily suspended those Signatories from the Russian Federation who had signed the letter of support for President Putin and the hostilities in Ukraine from access to MCO activities. The MCO had previously issued a statement of solidarity with the universities in Ukraine, 79 of which had signed the MCO – the highest number from any country, and issued a request for Signatories in other countries to provide assistance. The gratitude from colleagues in Ukraine has been immense and we are so pleased to be able to welcome Rector Grynyuk of the Vasyl' Stus Donetsk National University to Bologna to help us understand more clearly their situation and how they are dealing with it.

To turn to our more pro-active work, the implementation of the MCO's 2020 – 2025 strategy continues apace. A research committee has been formed, the research topic 'the responsive and responsible university' has been identified, funding has been allocated from reserves to take the work forward, an appointment process is in progress for a research assistant and an extended workshop will take place in Tbilisi, by kind invitation of Ilia State University, towards the end of September. This work will involve other signatories who wish to be involved and will produce materials and events to help universities to serve society more effectively in accordance with the principles of the MCU 2020.

To enable a larger number of universities to benefit from the MCO's Living Values project and provide support in other ways, additional Ambassadors have been appointed after a global competition. Ten more universities have signed up to implement the Living Values project in their universities. In Stockholm, in June, by kind invitation of the President of Stockholm University, all Ambassadors and engaged universities came together to benefit from the insight of international experts, to reflect on the earlier pilots and to further develop the project. More details can be found at <http://www.magna-charta.org/activities-and-projects/living-values-project>

The number of universities signing MCU 2020 continues to grow and the total number of universities that are signatories of either MCU 1988, MCU 2020 or both now stands at 965. Those universities which are signatories of MCU 1988, and who have not yet done so, are invited to sign MCU 2020, either virtually or in person on the next opportunity. Details can be found at <http://www.magna-charta.org>

The MCO wants to lead by example and hence, in the light of its experience during the pandemic and the growing awareness of the climate emergency, it considered which of its activities should best take place in person and those which might effectively take place virtually. The Anniversary will continue to be held in-person, as will training events and workshops where more complex human interaction is necessary. Otherwise, the webinar series supporting MCU 2020 and other activities will take place online. The Council will normally meet once in person each year and all committee meetings will be virtual. That will also release more funds for front line activities.

The MCO will continue to seek to engage all signatory universities in its work. The Observatory's over-arching objectives are to: strengthen the network of universities that share the principles set out in the MCU; disseminate the values set out in MCU 2020 and promote their application in practice; promote and communicate the Observatory's activities and its mission; increase the number of universities applying to sign the MCU and engage more closely with more kindred national, regional and global organisations.

More details about how this is to be achieved can be found on our website at <http://www.magna-charta.org/about-us/strategic-plan> We plan to improve the website so that it will feature research findings and input from Signatories so that it is more useful as a source of information on fundamental values in practice.

The membership of the Governing Council is relatively new with 9 of the 14 members (some 2/3 of the total) taking office within the last 18 months. This includes a new Rector of the University of Bologna, Professor Giovanni Molari, whom we welcome as the MCO's new President, and two new Vice-Rectors Professor Raffaella Campaner and Professor Cristina Demaria whom we also welcome. Very sadly, earlier this year we learned of the sudden and untimely death of Council member Professor Narend Bajinath whom we miss greatly. We welcome most warmly all new members of the Council and Ambassadors.

We are grateful to the University of Bologna for hosting this Anniversary and for the financial and other support which it provides for the Observatory. We are dependent on the majority of our funding coming from sources other than UNIBO and continue to appreciate the way in which voluntary donations from Signatories are holding up despite the pressures on university finances. We thank warmly those universities who have supported us. The 2022 list can be found at <http://www.magna-charta.org/about-us/magna-charta-supporters-2019-1> We will however need to raise more income to fulfil our strategy but we believe that if we do the things which Signatories value the funds will be forthcoming.

The Observatory values greatly the role played by our administrator Carla Pazzaglia and our Communications Officer Mary Beth Gauthier. We thank the members of Council and the committees for all that they do for the Observatory in an entirely voluntary capacity. It is however the support, engagement and action of the signatory universities which is most essential and cherished. Thank you for all that you have done to enable the Observatory to progress to this stage and thank you, in anticipation, for all that we hope you will do to realise our aim to enable universities to play an even greater role in society in these turbulent times and in the future.

David J. Lock
Secretary General
September 2022.