

Magna Charta Observatory Conference Report

Tuesday, 11 November 2025

Pre-conference Sessions

The Magna Charta Observatory: plans, projects and progress

Opening Remarks

The conference began with welcoming remarks from **Dr. Patrick Deane**, President of the Magna Charta Observatory's Governing Council, Principal and Vice-Chancellor of Queen's University in Canada, and Chair of the Conference.

Dr. Deane reflected on the evolution of the Magna Charta Universitatum, noting a significant shift from the 1988 declaration towards practical application. He observed that while the original document proclaimed values, the 2020 version (MCU 2020) emphasized how these values should operate within universities. Dr. Deane highlighted that five years after MCU 2020, there exists in many parts of the world "a crisis in academic values, a great deal of conflict and debate around the issue of academic integrity and institutional autonomy."

He emphasized the importance of the conference's focus on moving "from the proclamation of values to the application of them" through research, the Living Values project, and building capacity for leadership in future generations.

Secretary General's Report

Mr. David Lock, Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory, provided an overview of recent developments and achievements.

Mr. Lock presented a historical timeline showing the founding of the MCO in 2000, followed by key developments including the Living Values Project (starting in 2016), the creation of MCU 2020, and the launch of the Responsive and Responsible University Research Project.

Key Achievements Highlighted:

- **1,000th University Milestone:** Mr. Lock announced that on Thursday of the conference week, the 1,000th university would sign the Magna Charta. The MCO now has signatories from 94 countries.
- **Ambassador Network:** The establishment of a global network of ambassadors who serve as "eyes and ears" for the Observatory, providing invaluable volunteer support to universities.
- **Essay Competition:** The development of a successful student essay competition, run for the third time in 2025, attracting 97 entries from 24 countries in its first iteration and more in following years.

- European Higher Education Area: The incorporation of Magna Charta values into the Tirana 2024 ministerial communiqué, which includes statements regarding the fundamental values of higher education similar to those of the Magna Charta. Some of these value statements explicitly mention Magna Charta.
- Ukraine Support: Strong engagement with Ukrainian universities, building on relationships established at the 2022 conference in Greenwich and continuing through the 2023 conference in Poland.

Mr. Lock outlined the MCO's strategy for 2025-2030, which focuses on:

- Strengthening the network of signatory universities.
- Encouraging universities to share successes in applying values.
- Expanding research initiatives.
- Engaging with students through a "Next Generation" strand.
- Deepening work on autonomy and academic freedom.

Regional Engagement:

The Secretary General announced plans to participate in the American Association of Colleges and Universities conference in Washington in January, recognising the need to engage with challenges facing North American institutions.

He shared examples of university engagement, highlighting:

- **Ilia State University (Tbilisi, Georgia):** Hosted two research workshops, live-streamed events, and seconded staff to assist with MCO research, with Professor Giga Zedania chairing the research committee.
- **American International University (Dhaka, Bangladesh):** Organised an international symposium on the responsive and responsible university in September, attended by national authorities, resulting in a request from Bangladesh to review their higher education standards through the lens of Magna Charta values.

Partnerships and Support:

Mr. Lock acknowledged the MCO's collaborative relationships with:

- International Association of Universities (celebrating its 75th anniversary).
- Scholars at Risk (celebrating 25 years).
- European University Association (co-founder with the University of Bologna).
- World Access to Higher Education Network (formerly WAHED).
- Global Student Forum.
- European Students' Union.
- Association of Arab Universities.
- University Solidarity Fund (USF Academics Without Borders).

He concluded with thanks to the University of Bologna for continued financial and hosting support, to voluntary donors, to the Governing Council chair and members, committee chairs and members, to ambassadors, to essay competition judges, and to the MCO's Administrator, Carla Pazzaglia.

The research agenda – findings to date and next steps ***The Responsive and Responsible University Research Project***

Professor Giga Zedania, Chair of the MCO's Research Committee and member of the Governing Council, presented the conceptual framework of the research project.

Prof. Zedania explained that MCU 2020 introduced the principle of responsibility, affirming that "universities should engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world." The research committee examined how this principle is implemented globally and what forms of institutional behaviour embody this idea.

He clarified that responsibility and freedom are not in opposition: "Talking about university responsibility is not to be understood as substitute for talking about academic freedom and institutional autonomy." Rather, responsibility "is the internal and voluntary expression of a university's autonomy."

Prof. Zedania emphasised the concept of "self-responsibility" - the free, conscious and autonomous choice of an institution to respond to challenges. He noted: "A truly free university does not want to be told to act. It chooses to act because its values compelled it to."

Project Overview:

The research examined six university projects, three focusing on acute crisis responses:

- Vasyli' Stus Donetsk National University (Ukraine) - maintaining academic mission after displacement by war.
- Wrocław Medical University (Poland) - mobilizing resources for refugee crisis.
- Mykolas Romeris University (Lithuania) - supporting Ukrainian scholars and students.

And three focusing on long-term social engagement:

- American International University (Bangladesh) - providing opportunities to disadvantaged populations.
- Technological University Dublin (Ireland) - integrating community engagement into teaching and research.
- University of Tetovo (North Macedonia) - implementing anti-discrimination measures.

Key Findings:

Prof. Zedania outlined four main conclusions:

1. Values are impactful: Universities that articulate and act consistently upon their values are better equipped to respond to crises and sustain engagement.
2. Partnership is essential: Genuine responsibility requires cooperation with communities, civil society, and public authorities.
3. Institutional adaptation is necessary: Assuming social responsibility often reshapes leadership structures and organisational culture.

4. Balance is critical: Successful institutions find equilibrium between coordination and autonomy, avoiding both excessive bureaucratisation and insufficient structure.

Professor John Davies, MCO Ambassador and editor of the project publication, provided details on the research project's methodology and dissemination plans.

Prof. Davies emphasized that this is "very much an action project" examining real initiatives addressing different opportunities and challenges. The research covered several key areas:

- Origins and driving forces for initiatives.
- Partner relationships and beneficiary dynamics.
- Content and scope of specific interventions.
- Critical success factors.
- Impact assessment.

The project explicitly sought self-critical evaluation: "We can only learn about what good practice is if we prepare to admit that this bad practice as well."

Target Audiences:

The research aims to serve multiple audiences:

- Partner universities and broader MCO membership.
- Societal partners (service users, funders, policymakers).
- Academic research community.

Dissemination Strategy:

Prof. Davies outlined plans for a comprehensive book with four main sections:

- Part One: Origins and project design.
- Part Two: Conceptual framework, including chapters on self-responsibility and academic responsibility.
- Part Three: Six detailed case studies plus a chapter on Latin American universities' role in societal development.
- Part Four: Ten overarching themes with synthesis and general learnings.
- Conclusions and reflections.

Beyond the book, dissemination will include:

- Regional presentations and workshops (already held in Georgia, Tokyo and Dhaka).
- MCO conferences and institutional workshops.
- An interactive online repository for case evidence, commentaries, and future iterations.
- An open-access conventional book.

Prof. Davies concluded: "This is a tribute, I think, to our universities, in that they've achieved a lot of change on the ground. And we can't ask for much more than that."

Case Study Presentations

Dr. Ilya Khadzhynov, representing Vasyl' Stus Donetsk National University, Ukraine, presented research on staff motivation in displaced universities.

Dr. Khadzhynov outlined the severe challenges facing Ukrainian higher education since Russia's 2014 aggression and the 2022 full-scale invasion. As of the presentation date, more than 3,800 educational institutions had been damaged and over 300 destroyed. Donetsk National University was the first to relocate in 2014, receiving the Atlantic Council's Freedom Award for this pioneering effort. Currently, 44 universities are internally displaced within Ukraine.

Key Challenges Identified:

- Loss of physical infrastructure, housing, and dormitories.
- Staff departures and deterioration of financial capacity.
- Destruction of ties with local stakeholders.
- Significant outflow of highly professional staff abroad.
- Lack of motivation due to confusion, helplessness, and war-related stress.

Dr. Khadzhynov emphasized a critical philosophical point: "War is the worst thing that can happen to a person. However, in these circumstances, the greatest mistake an individual or an institution can make is to adopt a victim mentality and shift responsibility to others."

Research Findings:

A 2024 survey of 121 faculty members revealed that 78% of respondents from displaced universities exhibit strong organisational loyalty. Key motivators identified included personal and social responsibility, self-development, and institutional loyalty. Barriers included psychological exhaustion, lack of time, limited financial resources, and scarce training opportunities.

University Response:

The university created five new programmes in 2022, including Management of Post-Conflict Territories and Rehabilitation Psychology in Emergency Situations, representing "a shift towards applied education for national reconstruction."

Dr. Khadzhynov concluded that "the staff motivation system in higher education institution, especially in the displaced one, is not only a tool for increasing academic productivity and strengthening the institution's ranking position, but when properly designed, can also become an effective mechanism for implementing the university's social responsibility toward its students, employees, and society as a whole."

Ms. Mary Deasy, from Technological University Dublin, Ireland, presented on community-engaged research and learning.

Ms. Deasy explained that her institution defines community-engaged research as a dynamic mechanism for engaging with community partners in the region. The program began in 2008 at the Dublin Institute of Technology (which later became part of TU Dublin through a 2019 merger) with campuses in areas of severe social disadvantage.

Programme Development:

Originally designed to encourage people from disadvantaged communities to pursue third-level education, the initiative evolved significantly. It secured three years of funding from the Higher Education Authority's Strategic Innovation Fund, establishing a support unit that eventually grew from one staff member to approximately 2.6 full-time equivalent persons through various EU funding mechanisms.

The programme involved students working with community partners in co-designing final-year projects, supervised by academic staff. Over its duration, significant numbers of students participated in community-engaged learning activities.

MCO Project Context:

In 2019, when TU Dublin was formed, the Students Learning with Communities programme faced an uncertain future during organizational redesign. The MCO research project provided "a really good opportunity for us to get involved in doing an evaluation" of how the programme could continue in the new university structure.

Research Methodology:

The project employed a two-pronged approach:

- External evaluation with focus groups and interviews involving community partners, academic staff, and support staff.
- Internal reflection on encouraging engaged research at postgraduate level.

Working with Professor John Davies, the team developed a conceptual framework underscored by civic engagement, change leadership, and building trust and relationships.

Key Outcomes and Impacts:

Ms. Deasy highlighted several demonstrated impacts:

1. Quality of Student Experience: Enhanced graduate attributes through curriculum-embedded engagement.
2. Community Partner Empowerment: Partners developed capacity to formulate their own research questions, as exemplified by:
 - A community electrical recycling group that worked with business students to improve processing operations, subsequently securing independent funding.
 - Saint John of God services co-designing apps with computer science students for mental health support.
3. Socially Conscious Graduates: Students gained practical experience in cross-sector communication and community engagement.
4. Institutional Culture: Enhanced collaboration within the university and with community groups.

5. International Reach: Publications, follow-on EU funding, and participation in initiatives like the "Togetherness" project with Belgian and Italian universities.

Current Status:

Following the MCO project, community-engaged research is now housed within the Research and Innovation service area, while the Students Learning with Communities programme is embedded in the Sustainability Action Lab. Ms. Deasy noted that academics "really wanted it back" after a pause of several years, demonstrating strong institutional support.

She concluded: "We do believe that it is a structured and value-driven approach, for mutual benefit," and suggested that it could be such a valuable activity for any university."

Living Values – evidence of impact

Mr. David Lock introduced the Living Values Project, explaining its origins and purpose.

The project emerged from the MCO Council's recognition that "it was no longer just sufficient to stand up and proclaim the values. We had to focus much more on how those values were being or could be put into practice."

The name "Living Values" carries deliberate double meaning: values that are alive today and values being put into practice today. The project development took approximately two years and involved consultations at conferences worldwide to ensure cultural sensitivity, recognising that "values vary. values are culturally determined and vary in different countries around the world."

Pilot Universities:

Sixteen universities agreed to serve as pilot sites, providing feedback that enabled refinement of the process. Mr. Lock noted this was "a bit like the wonderful software advertisement a few years ago showing people building a plane while that plane was actually flying."

Project Objectives:

The Living Values Project aims to help universities ensure that:

- Espoused values reflect the institution's mission and community.
- Staff, students, and stakeholders have been effectively engaged in defining values.
- Members of the institution can articulate values successfully.

Mr. Lock emphasised the reason for the importance of this work: "What's the most precious thing a university has? It is its reputation and its reputation based on values."

Project Design:

The MCO designed the project to be:

- Accessible to all universities, including non-signatories.
- Web-based and freely available.
- Supported with additional guidance when needed.
- Developmental and continuously learning.

Seven-Stage Process:

1. Initiation.
2. Identification of a map of values.
3. Defining how selected values manifest in practice.
4. Four additional stages (detailed in online materials).

Mr. Lock clarified that it is not necessary for universities to start at step one and go all the way through. Starting points can depend on institutional circumstances and motivations. "It's not a journey from the top to the bottom and then that's it finished. It's very useful to loop back and to evaluate and to reflect."

Benefits:

Depending on starting position, benefits include:

- Improved university performance.
- Better stakeholder and student relationships.
- Increased staff and student engagement.
- Greater commitment to institutional purpose and values.

Mr. Lock shared an example of success: one pilot university used the project to restore government confidence after concerns about graduate values, making straightforward changes like building values into staff and student inductions, resulting in improved relations with government authorities.

Case Study: Durban University of Technology

Ms. Lorna McCullough, from Durban University of Technology, South Africa, presented a compelling case of a non-signatory university that independently adopted the Living Values project.

Institutional Context:

Durban University of Technology (DUT), located in KwaZulu-Natal province, evolved from the Durban Institute of Technology. The university serves approximately 36,000 students with just over 2,000 staff members across six faculties: Applied Sciences, Health Sciences, Engineering, Arts and Design (including Education), Accounting and Informatics, and Management Sciences.

Strategic Planning Process:

The Vice-Chancellor assembled "a very eclectic, very maverick bunch" of ten people from different areas to create a new strategic plan called "Envision 2030." The directive was clear: "strategy on a page" covering an ambitious 11-year period.

Ms. McCullough explained the South African context: "Because of state capture and fraud and corruption being pretty much part of the South African culture and universities supposed to be making the change, we decided that we really needed a strategy that was values driven, values-led, and values-inspired."

Discovery of Living Values Project:

Through Professor Eva Polak's introduction to the Magna Charta Observatory and the Living Values project, DUT intensively researched pilot universities, ultimately focusing on three: University of Stockholm, University of Tasmania, and Glasgow Caledonian University. While they initially considered adopting Glasgow's framework directly, they characteristically chose to amend and adapt it.

Framework Development:

DUT's framework comprises:

- Five core values (as standards).
- Five principles (as moral compass).
- A student voice component.
- Behavioral expectations for committee members.

Ms. McCullough emphasised the participatory nature: "This was 100% developed by the people - for the people. It took 41 workshops to deliver the framework. So no one could say management is imposing this on us."

Implementation Strategies:

DUT employed multiple approaches to embed values:

1. Physical Infrastructure: DNA structure installations on the main Durban campus and the Pietermaritzburg township campus, held together by values and principles representations. These have become popular graduation photo locations.
2. Student Engagement:
 - Annual student essay competition on values.
 - Values and principles pledge for all incoming students.
 - Poetry and rap songs about values.
 - Values champions among the student body.
3. Staff Integration:
 - Performance management 100% aligned to strategic plan.
 - Values visible on staff cards, clothing, banners, walkways, and staircases.
 - 360-degree evaluation based entirely on values and principles.
 - Values moments in meetings.
 - Values champions among staff.

Ms. McCullough candidly acknowledged ongoing challenges: "We do not have 36,000 energetic students. We do not have 2,200 perfect staff members, but it is a work in progress." She finds encouragement in Professor Parker's advice: "Culture takes time to change."

Measurement and Accountability:

As a strategic objective, the values framework is formally measured using a traffic light system:

- Green: on track.
- Amber: emerging concern.
- Red: of concern.

Data is collected from multiple sources, collated into reports, and used to address areas requiring attention. Ms. McCullough shared that the most recent report was produced just the week before the conference.

Case Study: Newcastle University

Professor Nigel Harkness, Deputy Vice-Chancellor at Newcastle University, UK, and **Ms. Karen McDowell**, Head of Organisational Development, presented their institution's journey with Leading Through Values.

Programme Origins:

Prof. Harkness explained that the initiative began in 2019 under previous leadership (including Professor Julie Sanders, present in the audience) as one of four projects under the MCO Living Values Project:

- Inclusive education.
- Climate change.
- Working as one university across multiple campuses (UK, Malaysia, Singapore).
- Engaged and Aspire.

The focus was on "creating a culture where values and behaviours are explicitly recognised, owned and practised," specifically by "creating the tools and the skills within our leadership group... to support the enhancement of our values and culture."

Programme Design:

Ms. McDowell detailed the programme's development:

Core Beliefs:

1. Positive culture is the underpinning key to success.
2. Leaders shape culture through their behaviour, environmental creation, and focus.

Initial Structure:

A three-day programme (two-day session plus one-day session) piloted with senior leadership and executive board, covering:

- Organizational Culture: Exploring what constitutes culture, including activities like photographing campus representations and identifying cultural gaps.
- Leadership Impact: Examining alignment between personal values and university values.

- Inclusive Leadership: Developing emotionally intelligent leaders who create psychologically safe spaces.
- Emotional Language: Normalising conversations about values and feelings using tools like the emotional wheel, ensuring "it was okay to not be okay".

Distinctive Features:

The programme aimed to:

- Build a safe community for vulnerable leadership discussions.
- Provide practical application through moral dilemmas requiring value-based decisions.
- Develop narrative and storytelling skills around values.
- Create reflective practice opportunities.

Programme Evolution:

Based on feedback acknowledging time pressures on busy leaders, the programme evolved significantly:

1. Condensed Format: Reduced from three days to two days.
2. Integrated Approach: Rather than standalone sessions, values-based leadership was embedded throughout all leadership and management development programmes.
3. Ongoing Practice: Incorporated reflection spaces and consideration of "people management as being a great underpinning part of leadership".

Impact and Reach:

- 94 sessions delivered.
- 413 leaders reached across 34 cohorts.
- Strong brand recognition: "People expect any session they come to have an element of leading through values in it".

Participant feedback included:

"I came along thinking it might be a pointless exercise, but realise the difference it can make if you just stop and think about how you lead and the values that you lead with."

Comments about the value of pausing to examine leadership practices rather than simply "getting on with it"

Leadership Perspective:

Prof. Harkness shared reflections as a programme participant:

- Executive Time Investment: Despite being time-poor, "there is a real value and real power in bringing senior leaders together".
- Top-Level Sponsorship: It was critical that the president participated in cohort one.
- Focus on 'How': There is value in shifting from discussing the why and what of change to how individuals lead change.

- Embedded Values-Based Leadership: "People talk about our values, as Karen said, and people challenge them when they think you're not leading through your values".
- Values Refresh: As the university enters a period of change, staff are "leaning into" values and reflecting on whether values created in 2017-2018 remain appropriate for 2025-2030.

Prof. Harkness candidly acknowledged: "We did develop our values. We did the leadership development. We have a behavioural framework linked to the values. But to be honest, it has largely sat on the shelf for the last few years. So there is a question about how we pick that up."

Conclusion:

Mr. Lock concluded the session by highlighting the value that pilot institutions found in mutual support during the process. He announced plans to develop a similar peer support mechanism focused specifically on leading by values, inviting feedback from conference participants.

Future-generations strategy

Student Essay Competition

Mr. David Lock opened the session by emphasising students' continuous involvement in the Magna Charta from its inception. He quoted from MCU 1988: "Each university must ensure that its students' freedoms are safeguarded and that they enjoy concessions in which they can acquire the culture and training, which it is their purpose to possess."

The MCO ensures student voice through:

- Two reserved seats on its Governing Council for students.
- Requirement for universities to demonstrate how they hear the student voice before signing the Magna Charta.
- Active student participation in MCO work and projects (not just voting).
- Twenty-nine students registered for this conference and are attending free of charge.

Competition Overview:

Over three years, the essay competition has attracted:

- More than 300 entries from 40 different countries.
- A launch webinar viewed by 300 live attendees and over 1,100 YouTube viewers (the largest ever viewing of an MCO broadcast).

The 2024 essay question, developed with sponsor World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN), asked: "What would you change about your higher education experience or environment to make it more inclusive for all who have the ability to benefit from it?"

Daniel Adeagbo, winner from University of Lagos, Nigeria, explained his motivation for entering:

"I studied social work and the concept of the course is about how can we make society more inclusive. It's about being conscious of the most vulnerable in our society... The idea of this

question is why they are in school. How can we guarantee all students meaningful outcomes? First of all, we have to address systemic inequalities in all our campuses."

Daniel emphasised that the question stimulated "student agency, not as consumers of higher education, not as just consumers, as customers of higher education, but as co-creators of solutions."

Martina Darmanin, former president of the European Students Union and MCO Governing Council member, reflected on the competition's impact:

"I had not expected that we would see this level of engagement, where we would get hundreds of entries... to see hundreds of students from all over the world sending and wanting to engage with the MCO. I think that is a very important message."

Competition Process:

Mr. Lock detailed the rigorous judging:

- Each essay is independently read and marked by two judges in each of four criteria, the marks from which are collated and significant variations investigated.
- Each judge read 80,000 words (equivalent to a PhD thesis) in 2024.
- Intensive, passionate panel meeting to select winners.
- This year, nine judges were appointed instead of five to distribute the workload.

New Developments:

- Some universities now run internal heats, submitting only the top 2 or 3 essays.
- Winners attended the WAHED conference in Cape Town; two had never travelled before and none had spoken at such events.
- Winners formed an effective team over three days.
- Organisers reported significant value added to the conference by student participants.

Judge Perspectives:

Professor Catharine Stimpson, participating online from New York, shared her observations over three years of judging:

On the format: "We had a strict word limit of 1000 words. Essays were disqualified if they went over 1000 words, even by an ant or a jot or tittle. That meant the writers had to be concise."

On essay content: "The essays believed in education... Education is mobility. Education is discovery, education is value."

On AI challenges: "When was an essay cogent? Because the writer was cogent. Or when was the essay cogent? Because AI was cogent... we began to look for the student voice... a personality on the page."

On student concerns: "None of our essayists were rude... but some were angry and for good reason. They wrote over my three years as a judge about corruption. They wrote... about faculty

being out of date, about books not being available... about administrations having no real belief in student government."

Prof. Stimpson concluded: "One of the things to take away from three years of judging is, again, the faith. The essayists have an education and our responsibility not to betray that faith."

Peter Kwasi Kodjie, Secretary General of All-Africa Students' Union and MCO Council member, reflected on judging:

"Being a judge gave a different perspective in terms of how you live as a student... you get to rank another essay better than it, only because it's innate worthiness."

He noted the evolution in essay quality over three years and raised questions about future development:

- Should the format change?
- Should the criteria address regional imbalances while maintaining merit-based judging?
- Should regional balance be formally considered?

Peter concluded by inviting participants to the student session the following day: "It would be raw, it would be crude. And I think that it would offer a different perspective."

Mr. Lock shared praise from the WAHEN board chair, who "congratulated the judges on their perceptiveness... on identifying essays and students who showed real passion."

Global Student Forum Partnership

Mr. Jacob Blasius Thomsen, Executive Director of the Global Student Forum, explained his organization's mission and the significance of the MCO partnership.

About GSF:

The Global Student Forum is an umbrella organization bringing together student unions and movements worldwide. In recent years, it has expanded beyond traditional student unions integrated into national legislation to include formal and informal student movements globally, providing "a space to come together to support and to capacity build, but also to bring their voices into global spaces that affect their lives."

Value of the MOU:

The partnership with MCO focuses on "bring[ing] forward the best practices of student engagement throughout the world" while recognizing diversity in approaches.

Mr. Thomsen emphasized an important distinction:

"There are a lot of times when you think about working with students. We can fall into the trap of saying, it must be very structured, where you have a committee and there must be students and they need to have voting power... I think it's wonderful and I think it's needed... But it is not everything, and it is not always the way to engage all students."

He praised the essay competition as complementing structured engagement: "We can actually start that conversation in a place where many more students feel comfortable reflecting on it."

Next Level Leadership Programme:

Mr. Thomsen presented the collaborative development of accredited leadership training:

"We recognise a group of student leaders, student organisations, and universities and international organisations coming together saying, we know that student leaders have a very specific set of skills that are very needed in society, and they gain a lot from being part of their university lives and their university development. But it's all very scattered and it's all very kind of undefinable a lot of times."

The programme creates:

- Structured learning experiences covering engagement, digitalisation, and transferable skills.
- Accredited credits students can use in formal education.
- Recognition of student leader skills and knowledge.
- Partnership between student organisations and universities ensures quality,

Mr. Thomsen emphasised the methodological innovation: "It's actually something that we can't guarantee the quality of. I think that was something that really excited me, that we could start recognizing the skills and knowledge of student leaders, but also saying we can bring it into the formal space of learning."

Future Generations Strategy

Mr. Lock outlined the emerging integrated strategy:

Strategic Components:

1. Essay Competition: Engaging students in reflecting on university values and societal contribution.
2. Next Level Leadership: Providing training for student leaders before they assume office ("when I was a student leader, I wish I had had an opportunity like that to learn before the baptism of fire").
3. Student Voice in Universities: Supporting students in making their voices heard within their institutions.
4. Career Trajectory: Following and continuing to support students as they become academics and eventually university leaders.

Future Development:

Mr. Lock outlined a gap in current MCO engagement:

"Up to now, Magna Carta has largely engaged with rectors, international directors and people at those levels. We have missed out a whole group of people in the middle... those people who engage with us as students or emerging student leaders, who will take those values into what they do in their lives in a university."

Student Ambassadors Proposal:

Based on discussions with this year's essay competition winners, Mr. Lock proposed developing a student ambassador network parallel to the existing network of ambassadors. While details remain to be developed, he confirmed strong interest from essay winners: "The unequivocal answer is yes, we want to be one. We want to engage."

This development will be pursued in collaboration with the Global Student Forum and European Students' Union.

Peter Kwasi Kodjie concluded the session with thanks and another invitation to the student-led parallel session.

Panel session: Insights from the US: Introducing the MCO's engagement with North America

Introduction

Dr. Patrick Deane opened the panel by explaining the MCO's strategic commitment to diversifying geographically beyond its European origins. He noted that while the 1988 declaration was "unashamedly, very European focused," the 2020 document reflected "a determination to take the work of the observatory more broadly elsewhere in the world."

Regarding North America specifically, Dr. Deane observed that while many American universities signed the 1988 declaration, "in recent years... the day-to-day engagement on the part of North American institutions, including institutions from my own country, Canada has been less than one might have wanted it to be."

However, engagement has recently intensified, sparked by a call from a former US university president about two years ago asking about the Magna Charta in light of "challenges with academic freedom, some challenges with institutional autonomy looming on the horizon."

Dr. Deane announced progress toward a memorandum of understanding with the American Association of Colleges and Universities and noted plans for an MCO chapter in North America.

From his Canadian perspective, Dr. Deane emphasized:

"What is going on in the US is of enormous interest... It is not that I see that as a pathology that is confined to the other side of the Great Lakes. We see similar tendencies in the Canadian university context."

He stressed that the 1988 declaration's "timeless truths" are actually not secure: "They have to be fought for and, debated and argued. If our institutions are to maintain the freedom that they need to do the work that they do for society."

The Trump Administration's Impact on Higher Education

Mr. Brendan O'Malley, Editor-in-Chief of University World News, provided comprehensive coverage of President Trump's administration policies affecting science, students, and higher education systems worldwide.

Scope of Coverage:

University World News has been tracking impacts through a dedicated "Trump Tracker" enabling readers to "scroll down and see the impacts over the months of the Trump administration going all the way back to Inauguration Day in January."

Mr. O'Malley characterised the emerging story as encompassing:

- Proliferating attacks on academic freedom and university autonomy.
- Significant cuts in funding for higher education and research.
- Serious knock-on impact on international science collaborations.
- Reorientation of international student flows.
- Policy changes across countries to capitalise on scholar flight from the US.

Initial Actions:

The administration began with:

- Dismantling diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs.
- Revoking visas and arresting international students active in Gaza campus protests.
- Slashing research budgets for universities and science institutes.
- Mass cuts to National Institutes of Health (NIH) and other research-funding agencies.
- Shuttering USAID, leaving researchers worldwide "afraid to speak out for fear of jeopardising other projects".

Research Funding Cuts:

In early March, Education Secretary Linda McMahon sent letters to Harvard and Columbia university's slashing \$2.6 billion, ostensibly to fight anti-Semitism. Professor Julio Frenk, Chancellor of UCLA, observed:

"The grants that have been cancelled by the government have nothing to do with anti-Semitism, wokeness or not allowing viewpoint diversity. These are grants in basic science, in astronomy and in physics, which have been the basis for American prosperity and security."

By June, Forbes reported NIH had cut \$3.8 billion in research grants. In August, the Supreme Court greenlighted cutting \$738 million in NIH health research funds, "a decision that led to thousands of research projects being cancelled in both the United States and in universities around the world."

International Impact Example:

Mr. O'Malley shared the case of Dr. Julie Burrow at CHUM in Montreal, whose lab collaborated with Columbia University studying medical care models for people who inject drugs:

"We received a very, very short email saying that in the midst of the cuts at Columbia, our project was terminated... Burrow did not have to destroy her data, but many others have not been so lucky."

Ideological Control:

The administration moved to control researchers even outside the US working on Treasury-funded projects, sending questionnaires asking:

- "Does this project reinforce US sovereignty by limiting reliance on international organisations or global governance structures?"
- "Can you confirm that there is no DIE project or that there are no DIE elements of the project?"
- "Can you confirm that this is not a climate or environmental justice project?"

Global Development Impact:

USAID cuts, described by Elon Musk as putting it "through the woodchipper," impacted:

- Universities across Africa.
- HIV/AIDS, malaria research.
- Climate research.
- Agricultural projects.
- Peace processes (e.g., Colombia's post-FARC reconstruction).

Professor Astrid Liliana Sánchez Mejía from Pontificia Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá noted that cuts threaten "the university's contribution to the reconstruction of Colombia's civil society."

International Student Impact:

While the June travel ban against 19 countries affected fewer than 20,000 students (less than 2% of total international students), Mr. O'Malley emphasised that "the ban is just one of a number of Trump administration policies that have created a hostile environment for immigrants in general and international students in particular."

Statistics cited:

- 6,000 students had visas revoked as of August 2025.
- Thousands had records erased due to minor or dismissed legal infractions.
- Changes to OPT (Optional Practical Training) program and H-1B visa rules.
- H-1B visa costs raised twentyfold from \$5,000 to \$100,000.

Immigration Enforcement:

By end of August:

- 230,000 people arrested.
- 234,000 people deported.
- 60,000 people in detention.

Impact on Student Interest:

At end of September, Studyportals data showed "interest in studying for a master's degree in the US had declined by a staggering 61% since Trump returned to the Oval Office in January."

The Trump Compact:

On October 1st, an offer to nine elite universities (since extended) set out commitments in exchange for preferred federal grant access:

- Revising governing structures that "punish, belittle and even spark violence against conservative ideas".
- Defining male, female, woman and man "according to reproductive and biological processes".
- Conducting and publishing "rigorous, broad-spectrum assessments of viewpoints".
- Keeping international undergraduate enrolment to no more than 15%, with no more than 5% from one country.
- Requiring all "foreign students" to take a mandatory course on American civics.

International Responses:

Countries responded in various ways:

- Japan: Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba ordered ministries to recruit researchers seeking to leave the US.
- United Kingdom: Announced new rules expanding highly skilled talent routes while tightening general immigration.
- Canada: 2025 budget contained nearly \$2 billion to recruit 1,000 scholars, while cutting student visas by 49%.

Expert Perspectives:

Mr. O'Malley highlighted two important commentaries:

Chilean education professor Julio Labrún wrote:

"Autonomy is not merely the absence of interference. It is the capacity to establish and pursue one's own priorities without coercion. It demands structural conditions that enable a degree of organizational latitude, stable and predictable funding, legal safeguards, and broad based social legitimacy."

Professor Sue McKenna from Rhodes University, drawing on South African apartheid experience, argued:

"One lesson from the eventual triumph over apartheid was that individual courage mattered, and so did international solidarity. Contemporary threats require similar collective responses."

This means professional associations defending member institutions. It means universities standing together rather than competing for scraps of funding, and it means the international academic community refusing to abandon US colleagues to their fate."

The Stakes for Democracy and Higher Education

Dr. Lynn Pasquerella, President of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, provided an analysis of threats to core academic values.

Dr. Pasquerella began by emphasizing urgency:

"The ideals that we gather around this convening academic freedom, institutional autonomy, shared governance, the right to teach and learn and global collaboration are more urgent than ever. Yet in the United States, every one of these core values is under attack in ways that pose an existential threat to both higher education and our democracy."

Partnership Breakdown:

She described how the productive half-century partnership between American higher education and government—serving as "an engine of innovation, research and scholarship, a magnet for international talent, a catalyst for social and economic mobility"—is unravelling through:

- Weaponization of research funds
- Threats to tax-exempt status
- Targeting of international students
- Fines for ideological non-compliance

Court System Changes:

Dr. Pasquerella noted concerning judicial developments:

"The American court system, which once championed the distinctive role of colleges and universities, no longer seems to recognize the critical importance of freedom from political interference as foundational to the strength of colleges and universities... Today's courts have demonstrated a troubling willingness to ignore stare decisis past precedent."

Courts now allow infringement on:

- Academic freedom
- The marketplace of ideas
- Every aspect of operations: admissions, curriculum, teaching methods, faculty hiring

Global Implications:

Dr. Pasquerella stressed worldwide significance:

"When the federal government conditions research grants, accreditation, financial aid funds, and the ability to admit certain students on ideological adherence, it threatens academic freedom. In practice... This matters not only for American institutions of higher education, but for the academic enterprise globally."

She outlined specific global concerns:

1. Weakened Model: "If the US model of the autonomous university is weakened, the ability of colleges and universities to partner internationally in ways that model freedom and independence is reduced."
2. Signal to Authoritarians: "It sends a signal that integrity is up for grabs, and it emboldens those who seek to dismantle higher education precisely because it poses a challenge to their authoritarian, autocratic playbook."
3. Reduced Global Collaboration: "The grand challenges and wicked problems of the future mandate global collaboration. And yet, the current policies in the US are making our colleges and universities less global in orientation."

Impact on International Talent:

Dr. Pasquerella described how increased scrutiny of international scholars, visa revocations linked to political views, and stricter foreign funding enforcement "undermines the capacity to attract global talent and engage in global collaboration."

She concluded this point: "When US institutions scale back global partnerships, the entire ecosystem of international collaboration shrinks... When pressure builds on that system, it limits our collective capacity to sustain an open global network of universities."

Call to Action:

Dr. Pasquerella outlined essential responses:

1. Emphasize Public Mission: "Universities do not simply serve their home country, they serve humanity. We must insist that the global dimension remains front and centre."
2. Build Solidarity Networks: "The attacks on academic freedom and institutional autonomy are not isolated. When any one institution is attacked around the world, each university must stand up and support the others."
3. Protect Research Freedom: "We need to work together to ensure that across countries and across institutions, research remains free, global and oriented toward shared human challenges."
4. Maintain Flexibility: Use virtual exchange and collaborative online international learning (COIL) to "promote inclusive global outlooks."
5. Defend Core Principles: "Institutional autonomy and academic freedom are non-negotiable. All universities must push back against any form of coercion that seeks to condition academic inquiry on ideological conformity."

Moral Leadership Crisis:

Dr. Pasquerella shared concerning observations about campus leadership:

"Over the past several months, I have never seen such a rise in moral distress among campus leaders, where they feel like they're being coerced into making decisions they believe are unethical, but they think they have no choice."

She described how moral distress has "morphed into a kind of moral injury that results from the continual erosion of one's moral compass," with leaders asking: "How much individual injustice am I willing to countenance for the sake of long-term reform?"

Different leaders respond differently—some like Song Richardson walk away to preserve integrity, others attempt to "subvert from within"—but Dr. Pasquerella emphasized: "They must be transparent about the costs of those decisions and tell the truth about what's really being lost and gained."

Magna Charta's Role:

She concluded powerfully:

"Participation in the Magna Charta is not symbolic. It's strategic and moral. It connects American higher education to a global coalition that insists on the independence of knowledge, on the integrity of research and on the role of universities as accelerators of human progress... In this moment, when the politicization of higher education seeks to narrow the nature and scope of what we do. The Magna Charta confirms that we cannot be compromised, that universities must be free, inclusive, globally engaged, and accountable to the truth above all else."

Defense Strategies and International Solidarity

Mr. Robert Quinn, Founding Executive Director of Scholars at Risk, offered a perspective from decades of defending academic freedom globally, concluding: "There's never been a better time to defend academic freedom."

Contextualizing Current Threats:

Mr. Quinn emphasized that US developments are not unprecedented:

"What we're seeing in the US is not entirely new. As Brendan alluded. We've seen it in Turkey, we've seen it in Hungary, we've seen it today in India... They're not even new just in the United States with this federal administration, because, um, state governments in the United States have been doing some of these things for certainly the last several years, if not longer."

Scholars at Risk's Position:

Mr. Quinn explained why SAR engages:

"I need to give a little bit of a disclaimer... we probably wouldn't be that involved if the administration had chosen to use normal channels... It's the fact... that so many of these things are being done through extra-legal measures and through measures that clearly resonate with authoritarian and anti-democratic processes."

When states declare certain terms off-limits, ban research areas, or target named individuals for sanctioning, "all of that is outside the norm. All of that is a violation not only of the core principles of the university, but of any democratically legitimate society."

Primary Tool of Repression:

Mr. Quinn identified a crucial insight from international work:

"Violence is not the primary tool of repression. Isolation is the primary tool separating us from each other, making everyone feel isolated, making everyone think they're being surveilled because it's a lot easier than to do and a lot more efficient than to take power."

Response Framework:

When isolation is the primary vector, responses must focus on unity:

1. Counter-Narratives: "We have to continually assert the legitimacy of the values and functions that we insist the university space has in society... getting out coverage and stories and examples about how the university does serve society."

Mr. Quinn noted that US public discourse presents "a caricature of higher education. It is not actually how higher education is mostly engaged with the public."

2. Courage Through Visibility: "When people see others stand up, when we see other people, help them to feel, no, you're not crazy. These things are legitimate. This is your job. That gives courage."
3. Creative Resistance: Drawing on "a ton of experience in American higher education, with various projects aimed at civil dialogue and discourse on the role of democracy."

Institutional Self-Examination:

Mr. Quinn emphasised necessary honesty:

"We have to acknowledge also that maybe we haven't been as fully in step with the broadest possible public as we could have been... we need to be intellectually and emotionally honest as we look at what reforms we can do."

He outlined two approaches to public engagement:

- Figuring out how to be in service to the public.
- Assuming risk for the public.

Scholars at Risk Initiatives:

Current US-focused activities include:

1. Academic Freedom Media Review: Bi-weekly clipping service of academic freedom articles and projects (previously global, now with US-specific version).
2. Emergency Defence of Universities (EDU) Coalition: 600-700 faculty sharing information across institutional types and political contexts, providing a forum for creative resistance development.
3. 2026 Plans:
 - Additional protection team staff for individual scholar support
 - Signposting for vulnerable US scholars
 - Litigation working groups to counter administration narratives

Specific Focus Areas:

Mr. Quinn highlighted two important conversations:

1. **Protest and Expression:** Clarifying distinctions and legitimacy of academic freedom, free expression, and protest following 2023-24 campus unrest.
2. **University Neutrality:** Challenging the "false security bargain" that withdrawal from public engagement provides protection.

"I guarantee you from the world experience, there is absolutely no evidence that the false security bargain of if we just stay inside and talk to ourselves, we'll be okay. Has any merit to it... when power wants to come for the university space, it will. Whether or not we did something to trigger it or not."

Why This Is the Best Time:

Mr. Quinn made his case:

"We have never had more connection. There are more networks that work on academic freedom today than there have ever been in the history of the human right... We have a bigger body of experience dealing with these threats than we've ever had before... We have more tools... We have the attention of more interstate bodies."

He reframed the challenge:

"What you know is what we really mean is there's never been a more important time to defend academic freedom... One side is trying to tell the public; this university space is not good for you. It has nothing to offer you, and that's a lie. So, if we can show that it's a lie, and we can make it true that we are in service to the communities of which we're in, then I think we have a very good chance of winning that narrative."

Practical International Cooperation

Dr. Jonathan Becker, Vice Chancellor of the Open Society University Network, provided reflections on cooperation models and lessons from authoritarian contexts.

Personal Context:

Dr. Becker clarified his American identity despite British institutional affiliation, noting his international career studying in Canada and the UK, working abroad, and engaging internationally through Bard College and the Open Society University Network (now the Global Higher Education Alliance for the 21st Century).

He emphasized relevant experience with early warning signs:

"When the canary in the coal mine, which was an American university called the Central European University, was under assault in Hungary... I don't think [it] got the... type of recognition that I think it needed at the time. And I think we're seeing that right now."

Three Challenges:

Dr. Becker identified distinct threat categories:

1. Political and Authoritarian Moment: The current US situation represents a "second redemption" paralleling post-Civil War rollback of rights. He explained that after Reconstruction came Redemption (stripping African American rights, beginning Jim Crow), then the Second Reconstruction (Brown v. Board, civil rights era), and now Second Redemption (stripping away previously secured rights).

Universities face particular targeting because they represent "two things that what I would call our Redeemer in chief really objects to":

- Young people who tend not to vote for the administration.
- Independent thinking.

The greatest threat: "not specific actions. It's self-censorship. It's the actions that people take without being seen."

2. Neoliberal Challenge: "The emphasis on career outcomes in universities, the de-emphasis, in fact, dismantling of social science and humanities departments, which are being done in part by institutions themselves."
3. Internal University Challenges: "Universities don't get off scot-free here... American universities in particular, don't get off scot-free."

Examples of Internal Issues:

During COVID, Dr. Becker approached an elite institution about having their humanities and social sciences doctoral candidates (requesting a \$150 million bailout) teach in Bard's early colleges serving inner-city youth:

"The response was, well, we think it would damage our doctoral candidates' opportunities to get jobs at research one institutions... That's moral bankruptcy, which is what we're defending right now."

He emphasized that academic work extends beyond traditional university walls, citing Bard's work in early colleges, prison education, and internationally in places like Palestine.

Extractive vs. Cooperative Partnerships:

"I think American institutions, often for all the talk of global cooperation, haven't often been more extractive than they have been. Cooperative. True cooperation is based on mutuality and reciprocity, and setting up an American unit in another country does not mean you're engaging people in necessarily meaningful ways, or in ways which enrich the local communities."

Learning from HBCUs:

Dr. Becker highlighted historically black colleges and universities' experience with American authoritarianism during Jim Crow, recommending Jelani Favors' work on how HBCU presidents navigated state governments while balancing student activism.

Magna Charta Values:

Dr. Becker emphasized two underemphasized aspects:

1. Civic Role and Responsibility: From Ben Franklin through Thomas Jefferson to the Truman Commission, American institutions historically emphasised the link between higher education and democracy. "It's really important, not just for us institutions to remember that, but also globally for us to remember the role universities play in shaping future citizens. It is not just employees, it is citizens."
2. Global Collegiate Networks: Universities are "part of global collegiate networks of scientific inquiry and scholarship, building on shared bodies of knowledge."

Practical Cooperation Examples:

Dr. Becker illustrated effective network collaboration:

Afghanistan, 2021: When the Taliban took over, networks of the American University of Central Asia, Central European University, American University of Beirut, and American University of Afghanistan "literally get people overland out of the country so they could continue their education... We did this because we had been working earlier as a network that believed in academic freedom."

One student who said "I can't get my homework in because the Taliban is invading my city" now runs a Yale program educating Afghan women using WhatsApp.

Trump Administration, 2024: When funds were withdrawn from American universities abroad with threats against using private funds, the network "stepped up then to offer our own online classes to students from the American University of Afghanistan so that they can get the credits so that they could graduate."

Methodological Principle:

"At its root... is the nature of cooperation we have... At the end of the day, what can we do together that we can't do alone? And if we think in those terms, then we will have more support for us going forward."

A recording of the Pre-conference session can be viewed at:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=be_h_cIM_jI&t=14s

Wednesday 12 November 2025

Conference

What Are Universities For? Higher Education Principles, Values and Responsibilities in a Fragmented World

Executive Summary

The Magna Charta Observatory convened its annual conference at King's College London to examine the fundamental question: "What are universities for?" in an era marked by political fragmentation, challenges to expertise, and threats to academic freedom. The conference brought together over 130 university leaders, ministers, students, and representatives from international organisations across 37 countries to discuss how universities can uphold their core values while fulfilling their responsibilities to society.

The event featured keynote addresses from President Michael Roth (Wesleyan University) and the Right Hon. Lord David Willetts, alongside interventions from UK Minister Jacqui Smith, ministerial representatives, and leaders of major higher education associations. Central themes included the tension between university autonomy and societal accountability, the crisis of institutional neutrality, threats to academic freedom in the United States and globally, and the role of students in defending university values.

The conference concluded with a signing ceremony where 35 universities from 12 countries formally signed the Magna Charta Universitatum 2020, reaffirming their commitment to academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and social responsibility.

Welcome and Introductory Remarks

Vice-Chancellor Shitij Kapur, King's College London

Vice-Chancellor Kapur welcomed participants to what he described as "probably the largest gathering of higher education leaders on a topic like this at King's College London ever." He reflected on the changed global landscape since the fall of the Berlin Wall, noting that "history is back" and universities must adapt to a complex world requiring different approaches.

Professor Kapur emphasised that while universities operate in different contexts with varying regulations and funding models, the Magna Charta provides "not a blueprint, but a compass" – a North Star for navigating fragmented times. He acknowledged the sobering reality that universities increasingly find themselves "caught in the middle of what seems like a fragmented world," perceived by many as partisan and political.

He highlighted three particular challenges facing Western universities:

- A growing perception among the population that universities are politically partisan;
- Internal divisions within university communities on contentious issues;
- Fundamental questions about the value of university education in relation to social mobility and graduate employability.

Professor Kapur shared a historical note about Bush House, the conference venue, which served as home to the BBC World Service for nearly 50 years after World War II. More significantly, he revealed that the original Magna Carta was formulated just 500 yards away at the Inner Temple, where King James negotiated with barons about the balance of responsibilities. "The Inner Temple and the legal infrastructure around it for many years after was responsible for the legal evolution of what it was going to mean in changing times," he observed. "And that's why we are here."

Opening Address by Conference Chair

Dr. Patrick Deane, President of the Magna Charta Observatory Governing Council

Dr. Deane opened the conference by acknowledging the intensity already evident in pre-conference discussions and welcoming all participants to this critical dialogue. He reflected on the shift in how universities are viewed globally, noting that they are "not always in the way we viewed them in the immediate post-war period as unquestionably forces for positive development."

Dr. Deane emphasised the urgency of current circumstances, particularly referencing discussions from the pre-conference program about the situation in the United States, which has "left many people breathless at the speed with which some of the principles and kind of mainstays of university life have been dismantled." He cited Robert Quinn's observation that "universities do not actually have the leisure to rethink themselves and their mission and their operating principles at the speed we typically do."

The President highlighted the existential nature of current threats: "The challenge being waged in social media against expertise and knowledge challenges the very basis of knowledge. This gets to the heart of what universities are about... this is kind of an epistemological threat to what institutions of our sort stand for."

He thanked participants for their commitment to the values enshrined in the Magna Charta and acknowledged the work of Secretary General David Lock and Administrator Carla Pazzaglia, noting that the Observatory is "a very small organisation in terms of its person power, but very large in terms of its impact."

Ministerial Address

The Right Honourable Jacqueline Smith, Baroness Smith of Malvern, UK Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Apprenticeships and Skills

Minister Smith delivered the government's perspective on higher education's role in society, emphasising that "democracy and academic freedom are the basis for everything" while acknowledging the complex political and geopolitical landscape in which universities operate.

She affirmed the importance of the Magna Charta principles: "In today's world, when factional voices try to divide us, we must respond with stories of the value of working collectively. Universities develop ideas and knowledge that are key to human development, and each time you promote your work, you demonstrate just how much human collaboration can achieve."

The Minister outlined the UK government's vision for higher education, centred on three priorities:

1. Protecting and growing universities' international reputation.
2. Increasing the sector's contribution to economic growth, both regionally and nationally.
3. Sharpening focus on enabling access to higher education for all with desire and ability.

On Regional Engagement and the Civic Mission:

Minister Smith stressed that universities must demonstrate clear impact in their local areas: "Every university's impact should be clearly evident in their local area, inspiring people to succeed in life and work." While acknowledging university autonomy as affirmed by the Magna Charta, she stated that "it's also the responsibility of government to set the context for how the system should work in the country's interests."

She called for universities to go beyond being anchor institutions: "The patchwork of economic and social engagement that makes up the UK higher education landscape is not enough to marshal its enormous national potential. Higher education providers need to work together to create a regional offer that supports students and drives growth."

The Minister emphasized that universities should be clear about their role locally, nationally, and internationally, building on strengths and working in partnership to ensure sustainability. She called for eliminating high-level skill shortages in subjects like science and creative industries through coordinated course offerings and research aligned with local and national contexts.

On Lifelong Learning and Research Commercialisation:

Minister Smith advocated for a system facilitating lifelong learning "so that people can easily study higher level courses at any time in their career," enabling workers to progress or specialise within industries or enter new ones at highly skilled levels.

She called for increased commercialisation of research to maximise regional impact, stating that "social and economic impact shouldn't be incidental and nice to have. We want to build on it where it already exists, supporting growth and opportunity to fully flourish in each region."

On International Partnerships:

Acknowledging UK higher education's global reach—delivering degrees in more than 200 countries and territories—Minister Smith emphasised that "international education partnerships do more than just impart knowledge... they build trust, strengthen systems and forge links between people, universities and nations."

She announced the upcoming publication of a refreshed international education strategy with increased focus on the mutual benefits of global partnerships. She also referenced the Education World Forum in London as "the largest gathering of education and skills ministers."

Closing Remarks:

The Minister concluded by celebrating the milestone of more than 1,000 universities signing the Magna Charta: "They are worthy and important goals, and I want to thank everybody who has worked hard to make this moment happen. I hope you enjoy the rest of today's celebrations and discussions, and that you recognise the enormous and growing significance of what you can offer to the world, to your countries and to your localities."

Keynote Session: Universities Under Pressure

President Michael Roth, Wesleyan University

President Roth delivered a provocative and deeply personal keynote address challenging fundamental assumptions about university independence and institutional neutrality. Drawing on his 18 years of experience leading Wesleyan University, he addressed head-on the contradictions universities face in maintaining autonomy while being deeply dependent on government support and societal engagement.

On the Myth of Independence:

He began by questioning the very first principle of the Magna Charta, which states that "research and teaching must be intellectually and morally independent of all political influence and economic interests." He noted the irony that immediately after Minister Smith's address, which outlined government expectations for universities, the audience applauded: "And we all applauded. It made perfect sense to me. I believe those things. But they are in tension with this principle that universities should be independent... That's just not true. You want money from the government, and the government wants things from you, from us."

He argued that the appearance of independence is maintained not through genuine autonomy but through "conveniently joint interests" that align most of the time. However, "when the government decides that we should not educate certain kinds of people because they have the wrong race or they claim to have a gender that the government doesn't recognize, or that we're teaching things that the government finds not useful or worse, corrupting of youth," the principle of independence comes under enormous pressure.

On Academic Freedom and Democracy:

President Roth made a crucial distinction between historical and contemporary contexts for academic freedom: "You can imagine... historical cases where universities can engage in relatively free research in an autocratic society... When Kant wrote 'What is Enlightenment?' he was arguing for the kind of freedom we would call today academic freedom, which was compatible with having a very strong monarch in the 1700s."

However, he argued that in our interconnected modern era, this is no longer possible: "Because of the interconnections of politics, economics and what we study, it is no longer possible for us to think that we can have the academic freedom required for serious scientific and social science and humanities research and not have democratic freedoms in society. Academic freedom depends on a public commitment to free speech and freedom of association."

He warned that as free speech and freedom of association are eroded by central power, "our ability to maintain the integrity of our educational enterprises is seriously compromised. And that is what is happening in the United States."

On Viewpoint Diversity and Political Narrowing:

President Roth addressed the controversial issue of political homogeneity in academia, sharing his experience of writing a Wall Street Journal op-ed ten years ago calling for "political affirmative action for conservatives at colleges and universities." He noted that studies show the professoriate has narrowed significantly over the past 25-30 years to occupy "a very narrow portion of the spectrum of political opinion... left for America, which would be kind of in the middle for you guys."

He criticized his colleagues' explanations for this narrowing, comparing them to historical justifications for exclusion: "It was the kind of explanation that white people gave about why they didn't hire people of colour 50 years ago. It was the explanation that my teachers gave me... why don't you hire more women? And the distinguished historians at Princeton said, 'we'd love to, but we only hire the best.'"

"My colleagues in sociology and anthropology say we'd love to hire people with views different from our own politically. But we only hire the best, and they don't hear what any actual person who's registered to vote would hear is just prejudice disguised by expertise," Roth stated.

He argued that this narrowness has contributed to universities losing "the respect of a broad swath of the electorate" because they are "seen as parochial in the worst sense of the word, that our narrowness is not justified by expertise. Our expertise is legitimated because of our narrowness."

On Institutional Neutrality:

In his most controversial remarks, Roth attacked the principle of institutional neutrality, which has been rapidly adopted by American universities. He noted that between 1967 and 2023, only nine colleges or universities claimed to subscribe to institutional neutrality, but "by my count, just checking before I got up on stage, now it's almost 150 colleges and universities in the United States have discovered the principle of institutional neutrality in the last two years."

"This is not a principle. This is a cover for cowardice," Roth declared. "It is a vehicle for college presidents to try to stay out of the line of fire... But to describe your unwillingness to take a stand as a principle that somehow promotes free speech seems to me the height of hypocrisy."

He challenged the empirical basis for institutional neutrality: "We had learned from the conservatives that if you want more speech, you have to have more speech. There is no empirical evidence that if the president keeps his or her mouth shut, then more people speak

up. In fact, on my campus, if I say something, all I know for sure is that there'll be plenty of disagreement."

On Modelling Intellectual Diversity:

Despite his criticism of institutional neutrality, Roth shared concrete examples of how Wesleyan models intellectual diversity:

- When protests erupted around Black Lives Matter after a student wrote an op-ed criticizing the movement, Roth wrote "Black Lives Matter. So Does Free Speech," which "did not go over well with many of the activists on campus." He then invited Jelani Cobb from *The New Yorker*, who had written that "free speech talk is often a cover for racism," to speak on campus. Cobb was able to discuss with students "ways in which people who have strong, intense disagreements can argue them out."
- When Judith Butler's talks were cancelled in New York City because of her association with the Boycott Israel movement, Roth, who has been "very associated with the anti-boycott movement," invited Butler to speak at Wesleyan, "much to the chagrin of the pro-Israel people on campus and to the puzzlement of the pro-Palestinian people on campus."

"These small steps on our campus... have allowed people to see the value of practicing intellectual diversity, not just ticking off numbers on a sheet saying how many Democrats you have, how many Republicans," Roth explained.

On the Broader Attack on Civil Society:

Roth placed the attack on universities within a broader assault on civil society institutions: "The attack on universities, although it's of course important to me... is part in the United States and elsewhere of an attack on institutions and civil society institutions that don't owe their legitimation to the central government."

He noted that this includes law firms, entertainment companies, and other organizations: "All institutions that don't owe their legitimation to the federal government are in danger of being attacked in the United States and in other countries where autocracy is on the agenda."

Closing Call to Action:

President Roth concluded with an urgent call for universities to defend democratic values: "If universities don't stand up for free speech, they will not be protecting themselves in the long run. They will be eroding the foundation of what we do. Because without a commitment to civil society, without a commitment to not have to take loyalty oaths to the government, colleges and universities will have their intellectual frontiers shrunken, their ability to teach students diminished, and our impact on the world sharply reduced."

"It would be a perversion of our mission to guard our independence [by remaining silent]," he argued. "We must maintain our clarity about the importance for institutions in civil society like ours, to not have to take loyalty oaths, to not have to shrink away from topics that are controversial, and to protect our students and our faculty and our staff from abuses of power. If we don't do it, I'm not sure who will."

The Right Hon. David Willetts, Member of the House of Lords, Former UK Minister of State for Universities and Science

Lord Willetts provided a UK perspective on university values, drawing on his experience as Minister for Universities and Science from 2010 to 2014, and offering both historical context and contemporary analysis of challenges facing higher education.

On the Meaning of "University":

Lord Willetts began with an etymological exploration: "Although Michael wrote a short book about students, I wrote a long book about universities. And the opening section is what does 'university' mean?" He corrected a common misunderstanding: "There is a belief that somehow university means that universities are for universal knowledge. That isn't what university means at all. University means self-sustaining, like a mini universe, fully autonomous, a self-contained entity."

He noted that "university" originally meant any autonomous civil society institution, but gradually narrowed to specifically mean autonomous institutions for study. "If a university is to make the wider cause for independent institutions in a rich civil society, it is the holder of the name that represents that type of institution."

Historical Context: King's College as a Political Response:

Willetts provided fascinating historical context about the conference venue itself: "After the Oxford-Cambridge dominance, a secular liberal movement led by thinkers such as Jeremy Bentham created University College London on a completely different model—no obligation to the established church, aggressively secular."

"The forces of the established church and conservatism, represented above all by the Duke of Wellington and the Archbishop of Canterbury, responded to the creation of University College London by creating a conservative alternative, King's College London. It was a response in its broadest sense. The creation of King's College was a political response to the creation of another higher education institution with a very different model."

This history, Willetts argued, "is quite relevant today, and is a reminder that when we talk about autonomy, we're also talking about autonomy within a political and historic context."

On Ideas Originating in Universities:

Willetts argued that some forces now damaging universities "themselves originate in universities." He identified two particularly problematic academic movements:

1. **Critical Theory and Identity Politics:** "The critical theory movement, which is an absolutely legitimate set of ideas that should be and can be expressed in a university environment... brings with them some quite dangerous arguments. They unleash identity politics, and also a doctrine that very much appeals to a certain group of academics: it says words matter and words themselves are instruments of oppression."

If your doctrine is that words are instruments of oppression, it is very hard also to maintain the principles of free speech."

2. **Early Years Determinism:** "There's a second set of ideas which I also think have done great damage to universities and which are widely endorsed within the social science community, which is early years determinism. Almost every education sector I've known in Britain in the last 30 years would say early years when asked what their priorities are."

He criticized James Heckman's influential research on early years intervention as "quite defective" and argued that it led to a neglect of higher education in policy priorities. More philosophically, he contended that early years determinism undermines the university's transformative mission: "If you believe neuroplasticity is all in the early years, then... the purpose of the university becomes highly selective because people's brains are already fixed."

Willetts celebrated newer neuroscience showing plasticity continues much longer: "What we now know about neuroplasticity carrying on for so much longer is a far richer and more open agenda for the university. Being at university changes you."

On International Development and Higher Education:

Lord Willetts criticized how early years determinism influenced international development policy: "It captured the World Bank agenda. If you look at international aid spend support for developing countries, for a long time the British government's aid priority was very simple: get girls in poor countries into primary education, which is a totally admirable objective."

However, he noted the cost: "I used to talk to African ministers who said, 'When Britain decolonized, why did you do absolutely nothing for the universities you left behind? Why was it that for 30 years we had total radio silence? No aid spend, no support, total disengagement and the absolute exclusive focus on early years and primary education.'"

On Funding and Autonomy:

Willetts reflected on the unintended consequences of his own reforms: "I naively thought that one of the advantages of this model [fees and loans] was that it would push... it would be another support for university autonomy, because the universities would be less dependent on central government grants to fund their teaching."

Instead, he found: "What I didn't expect was that even whilst England ended up with a system of unusually low levels of taxpayer contribution to higher education, at the same time, the level of public interest in what graduate earnings... what are the bad courses, what should we stop universities teaching would, if anything, intensify."

He had wanted graduate earnings data to inform student choice, but "instead of this empowering student choice, it has become another instrument that is prayed in aid as to why governments should intervene more to try to close down certain courses at certain universities."

On Research and the Haldane Principle:

Willetts discussed the Haldane principle protecting research independence in Britain, noting its origins in WWI when Britain created its first public research programme. He shared a

revealing historical detail: "The doctorate emerged in Britain in 1917, after the British Foreign Office agonised about why America was neutral in the First World War... It was established that one of the main reasons why America was so inclined to Germany was that American academics were coming to Germany to do their research and get their doctorates... Something like a third of all senior staff at Harvard had German research qualifications."

While supporting the principle that "politicians shouldn't determine exactly who does what research," he expressed frustration with academics' failure to engage with policy problems: "How few of them ever said, 'What are the problems you are wrestling with? Because it's possible, we might be able to do some research which is relevant for them.'"

He cited the example of the government's "Areas of Research Interest"—800 areas where departments indicated research would be helpful, with a majority having clear social science angles. "This list has had a negligible impact on any research activity anywhere in the UK. Nobody—I've never come across an academic who said when deciding what my doctoral program should be... let's look at what the actual problems are that British government departments say they're wrestling with."

On Freedom of Speech and its Limits:

Discussing freedom of speech legislation, Willetts highlighted the complexity of balancing absolutist positions with practical realities. He recounted that when the government tried to legislate to protect freedom of speech, the minister was asked whether Holocaust denial could be expressed at universities.

"She said yes. Holocaust denial is a criminal offence in Germany. It is not of itself a legal offence in the UK. So, her argument was at the absolutist end of the spectrum. Within 24 hours, Ten Downing Street had intervened and said no, we do not think that this absolute right includes Holocaust denial... And to this day, it's never been clear exactly what these guidelines are."

Willetts posed practical questions that universities must navigate: "Can a homophobe speak at university? Should a homophobe be able to speak during Gay Rights Week when there's a pride march happening that day? Can religious groups that believe in gender segregation have an event where young male students sit in different rows from young female students?"

"There are all these types of decisions which are about how you manage a community and not helped by just total absolutism," he argued. "The real problem with freedom of speech debate in Britain is that we have lost confidence in universities managing all these tricky types of issues, and they ended up going to either the courts... or by a regulator."

A Note of Optimism:

Despite acknowledging the serious threats, Willetts concluded with "a note of naive optimism" about whether American-style culture wars could happen in Britain and Europe. He cited several protective factors:

- The strength of parliamentary systems with legislative power and scrutiny versus "the powerful presidential executive model";
- Employment protection rights that prevent arbitrary dismissal;
- National institutions like the BBC that maintain "a national conversation";

- Continued amicable cross-party dialogue on higher education policy.

"I personally think that factors like these mean that although America is a very powerful warning, I think Europe will be able to avoid the worst of the problems and challenges and attacks facing the US," he concluded.

Panel: Codifying responsibilities and rights in higher education: views from outside the sector

Session moderated by Dr Sijbolt Noorda, former President of the Governing Council of the Magna Charta Observatory.

Carl Vannetelbosch, Project Officer Social and Human Sciences, UNESCO

Carl Vaneetelbosch presented UNESCO's work on the Recommendation on Science and Scientific Researchers, adopted by all member states in 2017, which "replaces or updates an instrument from 1974... adding, importantly, a four-yearly monitoring exercise."

Ten Key Areas of Values and Principles:

Vaneetelbosch outlined the ten key areas around which UNESCO organises values and principles for science:

1. Responsibility of science toward ideals such as justice, peace, human welfare and dignity, and the environment.
2. The need for science to meaningfully interact with society and vice versa.
3. The role of science in national policymaking and international cooperation and development.
4. Promoting science as a common good.
5. Inclusive and non-discriminatory work conditions and access to education.
6. Scientific conduct subject to universal human rights standards.
7. Balancing the rights, freedoms, and responsibilities of researchers, including academic freedom and scientific integrity.
8. The vital importance of human capital for a sound science ecosystem (employment, mobility, education, training, working conditions, protection of scientists)
9. Ethical codes of conduct for science.
10. The role of member states in creating enabling environments (governance, infrastructure, public funding).

Scope and Application:

"The scope of this recommendation applies to all the sciences—natural sciences, social sciences, humanities—and it applies not just to all scientific researchers, but also technicians, support staff and students that contribute to research," von Bosch explained. "And importantly, it also applies to institutions responsible for research and development like universities. So universities are both subject to but also agents of these principles."

Recent Developments and Challenges:

Vaneetelbosch highlighted emerging threats that prompted UNESCO's 2023 strengthening of implementation:

- A Nature study showing 1 in 5 scientists who spoke publicly about COVID received threats of violence.
- Global Witness research indicating nearly 40% of climate scientists have experienced online harassment.
- A L'Oreal-Ipsos study showing nearly half of women scientists experienced sexual harassment at work.
- Scholars at Risk documentation of researchers being silenced, displaced or worse in conflict zones.

Programme on Freedom and Safety of Scientists:

In response, UNESCO established a dedicated programme with five pillars:

1. Maintaining engagement with policymakers.
2. Data collection, analysis and monitoring to identify gaps and trends.
3. Enhancing institutional capacities to improve policy frameworks.
4. Advocacy and awareness raising.
5. Building alliances with universities, member states, and civil society.

Monitoring Findings:

Vaneetelbosch shared results from the second quadrennial monitoring exercise, just adopted in Samarkand: "94% of member states reported legal coverage that protects academic freedom. On the other hand, we also found that 34% have policies in place that restrict academic freedom."

Reasons cited for restrictions included national security, classified information, sensitive research, limiting hate speech, curbing certain biomedical research developments, and "governmental authority over university governance structures, which I think is particularly relevant."

Ukraine Support:

Vaneetelbosch described UNESCO's collaboration with Ukraine and the European Union on an action plan for short-term emergency response (remote access to laboratory equipment, grants, mental health support) and long-term rebuilding (developing a scientific forum, aligning national policies with international standards).

Jonathan Becker, Executive Director, Global Higher Education Alliance for the 21st Century

Jonathan Becker addressed the conference both as leader of the Global Higher Education Alliance and as a representative of Bard College, bringing practical experience in supporting at-risk scholars and institutions.

On "Deeds Not Words":

Becker framed his remarks around an article he wrote titled "Deeds Not Words: The Push for University Neutrality Harms Education and Society." His thesis had two parts:

1. "The push for neutrality can be extremely problematic... Should we be neutral to democracy? I told yesterday how I have a book coming out on Monday about student voting rights, and I do think that institutions should speak out about that. I think they should also speak out about access to education and other issues."
2. "It's far more important to embrace a constructive engagement with society... with the strict understanding that neutrality might limit this. So, for example, we do a large prison education program... Does doing that mean that we support the carceral state and therefore we are compromising debate on the college campus? I think the answer is no."

Core Principles:

Becker outlined the Global Higher Education Alliance's three foundational principles: academic freedom, the civic mission of universities, and access to higher education. "These come together in deeds which I think speak to the value of the words that Magna Charta espouses."

Supporting Displaced Communities:

The Alliance provides:

- Programming for more than 2,000 displaced students annually.
- Matriculation to degree-granting programs for more than 1,000 displaced students.
- Teaching opportunities for at-risk scholars, both for their own career pathways and to teach displaced students.

Working with Institutions in Exile:

Becker highlighted the Alliance's network of institutions in exile:

Yangon University from Myanmar (smuggle beyond borders after the coup)

- Partnership with Saint Petersburg State University (Bard was declared "an undesirable organisation in Russia" and named "an enemy of Russia's constitutional order").
- American University of Afghanistan (after Taliban takeover).
- Central European University (forced from Hungary to Austria).
- European Humanities University (from Belarus, now in Lithuania).
- New College Florida (supporting faculty after political takeover).

"We create these virtuous circles to enhance education," Becker explained. "We try to mix in the classroom students who are displaced and students who are not displaced from universities in exile and universities which are brick and mortar."

Civic Engagement:

Becker emphasised student-led initiatives:

- The Bard Prison Initiative, which became famous when "our prison debate team beat Harvard... That seems like a small thing, but it actually helped change the entire national narrative on the value of incarcerated students. Both Obama and Trump—let me say something positive about Trump—both of them supported financing incarcerated students through federal loans, which Clinton had taken away."
- Early College New Orleans, which "at one point educated nearly 10% of public school students in New Orleans post-Katrina".
- A new educational program with Kyiv School of Economics for Ukrainian high school students.

Uniting Words and Deeds:

"By creating deeds, particularly in education and civic engagement, by empowering young people, by promoting education, we are trying to realize the words of organizations like Magna Charta," Becker concluded. "Our students who are taking classes with people from around the globe, especially people who are displaced, believe they're learning more and learning better because of who they're studying with. Our faculty feel a revival because they are teaching different types of people in interesting and important educational environments."

Cezar Mihai Haj, Co-Chair EHEA – Executive Agency for Higher Education, on the Fundamental Values of Higher Education

Cezar Mihai Haj presented the European Higher Education Area's systematic approach to codifying and monitoring fundamental values across 47 higher education systems.

The Bologna Process and Fundamental Values:

"The Bologna Declaration that started this whole process references the fundamental principles laid down by the Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988. So these are connected," Mihai Haj noted.

He explained that for the Bologna Process's first decade, fundamental values were present but "not presented in a systematic way, and they were not central to the policy work, as the main focus was on structural reforms like the three-cycle system."

Systematic Policy Development (2015-2024):

Following the 2015 crisis regarding academic freedom, ministers agreed in 2018 to six fundamental values:

1. Academic freedom.
2. Academic integrity.

3. Institutional autonomy.
4. Student and staff participation in higher education governance.
5. Public responsibility for higher education.
6. Public responsibility of higher education.

In Rome 2020, ministers agreed on a common understanding of academic freedom, beginning "a well-articulated policy framework of defining these values." This continued in Tirana 2024 with agreement on how to codify the remaining values.

Voluntary Commitments:

"Governments agreed on concrete and explicit voluntary commitments to protect and to promote these fundamental values. This required governments to enact new policies, to adapt existing policies in order to support the common commitments."

Framework for Monitoring:

Ministers endorsed a framework examining both de jure and de facto dimensions:

- De jure perspective: Checks on existence and alignment of legislation and regulation, both for protection and promotion, plus policies and initiatives.
- De facto perspective: A qualitative narrative on infringement, fulfilment, threats or positive developments.

"This is a proposal that now within the Fundamental Values Working Group is a huge discussion on how we deliver the actual implementation," Mihai Haj explained. The final report will be presented to ministers in 2027 at the conference in Romania and Moldova.

Challenges:

"Working with public authorities to report how they do on fundamental values, including academic freedom, can be quite sensitive," Mihai Haj acknowledged. He noted the huge diversity among 47 members "from Iceland to Armenia and Kazakhstan to Portugal" with varying "historical legacy, including towards academic freedom, institutional autonomy and practices at national level."

Russia and Belarus are suspended from the European Higher Education Area. "Everyone is active in this discussion, even countries that were not very active before. I expect we will have interesting debate... that is not granted... of managing to monitor the fulfilment of states towards these fundamental values."

David Akrami Flores, Head of Section Erasmus+ Key Action 3: Policy Support, DAAD, Germany

David Flores presented DAAD's approach to promoting fundamental academic values through science diplomacy and practical programs, framed within their Strategy 2030.

Balancing Values and Interests:

"In our Strategy 2030, we make one thing clear: democracy and academic freedom are the basis for everything we at DAAD do," Flores stated. "At the same time, we all know that international cooperation has become more complex politically, socially, and geopolitically. So what we say is we need to balance values and interests. In German, we call this Realpolitik—kind of science diplomacy that is realistic but still value-driven."

Ukraine as Example:

Flores described DAAD's comprehensive support for Ukrainian higher education:

- Until early 2025, coordinated an EU-funded project providing support for implementing Bologna reforms across all EU countries.
- Used national funding to work directly with ten Ukrainian universities on strengthening institutional capacity, implementing Bologna instruments, and promoting internationalization under wartime conditions.
- A new follow-up project starting December 2025 with the Ukrainian Ministry of Education as an official partner.

"Universities in Ukraine continue to face enormous challenges—keeping education running, supporting students and protecting academic freedom in the midst of war," Flores noted. "This shows how solidarity and cooperation can make fundamental values tangible, not just words, but real instruments for resilience and recovery."

Realpolitik in Practice:

After Russia's invasion, "DAAD suspended institutional cooperation with Russian state organisations. But we continue to support individual Russian students and researchers who are committed to academic freedom and international dialogue and who want to come to Germany to study or research."

"That's what we call Realpolitik—a form of science diplomacy that protects principles while remaining open to people. It means acting realistically but never cynically, supporting individuals today who may become the bridge builders of tomorrow."

The Hilda Dumin Programme:

Named after a German poet in exile, this programme "supports students and researchers who have lost the right to education in their home countries because of political views, gender, religion or background." Flores emphasised it's "more than protection. These individuals often become future partners and advocates for academic freedom... both an act of solidarity and an investment in the future in trust, understanding and shared values."

The Fundamental Academic Values Award:

Created within the Bologna context, this international prize recognises "young researchers who explore topics such as academic freedom, university autonomy and social responsibility... It shows that commitment to fundamental values is global, diverse and growing."

Conclusion:

"Values are at the heart of everything DAAD does internationally. They are not a side topic. They guide how we build partnerships, design programs, and respond to crises... In a world where academic freedom is clearly under pressure, we see our role as both pragmatic and principled—to enable international cooperation while keeping fundamental academic values at the core of what we do."

Amy Reid, Senior Manager, Freedom to learn, PEN America

Amy Reid joined virtually to provide a stark assessment of censorship threats to American higher education, drawing on both her professional work at PEN America and personal experience at New College Florida.

A Liminal Perspective:

"I am speaking from a liminal space, not just because I'm here on a screen, but because I am both outside of academia—as I currently work for PEN America tracking and pushing back against government censorship—and inside academia, because it was only this past August that I retired after almost 30 years on the faculty of a small public honors college that was the theatre for a 2023 siege launched against higher education by Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida."

Record-Breaking Censorship in 2025:

Reid shared alarming statistics from PEN America's research: "2025 was a record-breaking year for state censorship in higher education. Between January and June, we saw more than 70 bills and policies introduced across 26 states to censor higher education. Twenty-two of those became law in 16 different states, while 13 of those laws included provisions specifically censoring classroom instruction—what we at PEN call educational gag orders."

"All but one of those laws included indirect measures such as limits on tenure, shared governance, or general education that chill the campus climate for free expression and academic freedom. Six states passed policies or laws for the first time to censor higher education."

Scope of Impact:

"Almost 40% of the US population—40% in 21 states—live in states affected by higher education censorship laws or policies. That's a staggering number."

Reid identified two main actors seeking to codify higher education values: "State legislatures are at the forefront of the list, and not in a good way. Now the federal government has entered the fray, and with fury."

Federal Actions:

Reid outlined devastating impacts from federal intervention:

- "Slashing of federal research grants and financial aid".

- "Weaponization of accusations of anti-Semitism to delegitimise higher education".
- "Targeted attacks on specific, well-known, mostly private research universities".
- "Medical research grinds to a halt".
- "Faculty can no longer speak frankly with students about issues central to American studies, including gender, race and immigration".
- "Foreign students are literally disappearing from campus".

The Coercive Compact:

Reid described the October 2024 "Coercive Compact" as "a Faustian bargain" offering universities "a vague promise of preferential treatment for funding, coupled with an explicit threat that those funds can be clawed back at any time" in exchange for:

- Signing away rights to autonomy in matters from tuition and curriculum to managing civil discourse and protest.
- Adopting "narrow and unscientific definitions of biological sex".
- Subjecting international students to "both quotas and ideological litmus tests".

"To be clear, the compact is censorial and discriminatory, a crude attempt to codify the subordination of education's search for knowledge to the priorities and sensitivities of the current administration. Censorship would be the price required for higher education to continue. But a censored university is no university at all."

Signs of Resistance:

Despite this bleak picture, Reid highlighted "reason for optimism in the rising opposition":

- Universities and one state legislature have declined to sign the compact.
- Only one college has publicly announced it would sign, "which only underscores its position as an outlier".
- New coalitions are emerging.

Emerging Collective Action:

Reid pointed to several encouraging initiatives:

1. Statement from Education Leaders (April): Organised by the Association of American Colleges and Universities and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, signed by over 650 sitting college and university presidents, calling for "constructive engagement to protect the integrity of public and private higher education because 'America's colleges and universities prepare an educated citizenry to sustain our democracy.'"
2. Pledge to Our Democracy: Signed by over 140 former college and university presidents affiliated with PEN America, calling for "the creation of a coalition of education with state and local leaders, students, labour unions and communities to stand up against authoritarianism."
3. Business Leaders Letter (June): 275 business leaders published a letter in the Wall Street Journal "calling on the government to restore higher education funding for research and financial aid and to uphold the independence of American universities."
4. Student-Led Academic Social Contract: Class Action held a conference at Yale affirming "in a time of deep social division, we are unified by a conviction that

universities can be engines of democratic renewal and a commitment to organizing for that future."

5. National Day of Action (Friday prior): Organized by American Association of University Professors, American Federation of Teachers, and student groups including Students Rise Up, Sunrise Movement, and Campus Climate Network, featuring events at more than 100 campuses nationwide with plans through 2028.

Conclusion:

"These efforts by academic and business leaders, by faculty and most importantly students to codify the values of higher education give me hope," Reid concluded.

Panel Session: Fulfilling responsibilities and rights – views from within the sector

This session, moderated by Professor Liviu Matei (Professor of Higher Education, King's College London and Co-Director of the Global Observatory on Academic Freedom), explored how organizations outside universities conceptualize, codify, and monitor academic values.

Moderator's Introduction:

Professor Matei framed the discussion around "frameworks of reference" for understanding values: "When we think about values, we tend to place ourselves within a particular framework of reference, which can be institutional at the level of a higher education institution, national... regional... or even global."

He explained that these frameworks include not just codifications of values, but also conceptualisations (definitions), guidelines for implementation, institutional mechanisms for enforcement, and monitoring systems. "Universities also codify values," he noted. "We spoke today about the Chicago principles, for example... But it's not only the universities themselves as institutions. Sometimes internal university associations do this."

Hilligje van't Land, Secretary General, International Association of Universities

Hilligje van't Land presented the IAU's comprehensive approach to embedding values across its global membership of universities from all continents.

Core Values Embedded in IAU Strategy:

"The values outlined in the Magna Charta Universitatum are embedded in the entire vision and mission of the IAU and permeate throughout the IAU strategy," van't Land stated. She outlined four strategic priority areas:

1. Value-based leadership.
2. Fair and inclusive internationalization.
3. Higher education and research for sustainable development.
4. Ethical and responsible digital transformation.

IAU's Defined Academic Values:

Working closely with members and the Magna Charta, IAU defined seven key values:

1. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy and social responsibility, locally and globally.
2. Cooperation and solidarity based on mutuality of interests and shared benefits.
3. Tolerance of divergent opinions, freedom from political interference.
4. Equity and access and success in higher education and open access to knowledge.
5. Scientific integrity and ethical behaviour as cornerstones of conduct.
6. Higher education and research in the public interest.
7. Quality in learning, research and outreach.

The Letter of Commitment:

"Each and every time, we invite our members to sign a letter of commitment to these academic values," van't Land explained. "By the mere fact that they sign the letter, they have to read it, put it on letterhead, send it back. We file it, and when a new rector comes in, we invite them to re-sign as well. So there is commitment institutions have to make. That's kind of a first monitoring exercise."

Rights and Responsibilities:

Van't Land emphasized "this dual nature of these values. They come with rights and they come with responsibilities... Academic freedom is not only a right of scholars to pursue truth, but also a duty to exercise that freedom responsibly within ethical and methodological rigor."

She cited Giga Zedania's concept of "self-responsibility of universities. That's what universities owe themselves and society and all the people who come through the institution."

Value Literacy Through Practice:

"We contribute to creating a value literacy—something that allows understanding through training, through dialogues, through leadership modelling," van't Land explained. "We help ensure these values are understood and not merely stated but become embedded principles that permeate everything a university does."

IAU supports university leadership through:

- Specific programs for leaders.
- Standard-setting initiatives.
- Joint statements (acknowledging "a lot of work that takes time").
- Regular conferences rotating around the world.

- Recent conferences on topics including: leadership, public-private higher education, societal impact, transforming higher education for the future, university values in a changing world.

Example Conferences:

Two weeks prior to the MCO conference, IAU held a conference in Kigali on "building trust in higher education." Next year's conference in Perth, Australia, will address digital transformation and its implications for values.

Countering Fragmentation:

"In today's world, marked by geopolitical divides and digital echo chambers and competing truth claims, we need to share and find points that will allow us to identify the academic values that make sense for everyone," van't Land argued.

She quoted Lynn Pasquerella from the previous day: "'Integrity is up for grabs,' and this foments mistrust in international cooperation. That's what we have to counter through everything we do."

The Role of University Associations:

Van't Land concluded by emphasising the unique role of associations: "Higher education associations teach the dialogical negotiation of values—always questioning, always debating, always reaffirming them collectively... In fragmented times, university associations have a special role as spaces of mediation, where the exercise of rights and the fulfilment of obligations meets in the shared pursuit of truth, human dignity and global solidarity."

"We have to ensure that the bridges that some people wanted to close yesterday remain open and, on the contrary, become the bridges to better cooperation."

Monika Steinel, Deputy Secretary General, European University Association

Monika Steinel provided insight into EUA's extensive work on university values, particularly around autonomy, academic freedom, and the protection of at-risk scholars.

About EUA:

"EUA is the largest association organization of higher education institutions in Europe. We have just over 900 members consisting of higher education institutions, universities, but also national university associations. So it is also an umbrella organization."

Steinel noted that "EUA is an early supporter of the Magna Charta Universitatum and of the Magna Charta Observatory."

Wide Definition of University Values:

EUA takes "a relatively wide view perspective on university values," encompassing:

- University autonomy (extensive work).

- Protection of at-risk scholars, institutions, and students.
- Academic freedom.
- Ethics and integrity.
- Engagement with society.
- Openness, tolerance and dialogue.

Key Activities:

1. The Autonomy Scorecard: A monitoring tool that also conceptualises university autonomy across Europe, examining four dimensions and providing regular assessments.
2. Support for At-Risk Scholars: Collaboration with Scholars at Risk and other organisations, including concrete projects.
3. Academic Freedom Principles and Guidelines: Published February 2025, focusing on "how universities themselves can protect and promote academic freedom".

Responsive to External Developments:

Steinel displayed a timeline showing how EUA activities respond to external events:

- 2016 coup attempt in Turkey → 2018 ministerial commitment to fundamental values in Bologna Process.
- Central European University's move to Vienna → 2019 joint statement on institutional autonomy and academic freedom.
- Russian invasion of Ukraine → MSK for Ukraine program, task force establishment, growing Ukrainian membership.

She noted parallel developments: "The Academic Freedom Index, various policy initiatives by European institutions, and other data-driven and policy initiatives."

EUA's Approach:

Three key principles guide EUA's work:

1. Institutional Self-Strengthening: "Suggest ways for universities to protect and promote values themselves and thereby strengthen their own internal and external resilience. This is really important to us."
2. Emphasising Responsibilities Alongside Rights: "We always highlight universities' responsibilities as well as their rights. We are very careful not to present academic freedom, for example, as a professional privilege, because during times when universities are sadly losing public trust and solidarity, that is a problematic avenue to take."

Instead, EUA seeks to "demonstrate and explain to the public why healthy and strong universities benefit them too... Maybe we need a new concerted public case for academic freedom and for fundamental values and why the entire society benefits from it."

3. Addressing Real Dilemmas: "We really emphasize the conundrums and challenges for institutional communities, and especially for university leadership, when addressing values-related situations or issues."

Complex Issues University Leaders Face:

Steinel highlighted difficult questions in the Academic Freedom Principles and Guidelines:

- Academic freedom and funding: "What is or what should be the influence of public and private funders on research and teaching?"
- Academic freedom and free speech: "Can they sometimes be in opposition to each other? How can you accommodate both on a university campus?"
- Geopolitical considerations: "Obviously very important in the current climate".
- Academic freedom versus openness of science and knowledge security.

"These are hugely important issues, and university leadership in particular are really having to face every day. They are not theoretical. They are everyday issues that they are grappling with."

Professor Daniele Joly, Chair of the International Advisory Board of the Global Observatory on Academic Freedom

Professor Joly presented a case study of attacks on academic freedom in France, with particular focus on the government's response to academic discourse on Palestine and Islam.

Historical Context:

"Attacks at the hand of the government hasn't started on October 7th. It started a few years before with a concerted offensive, accusing academics of being 'Islam-leftists' that constitute a gangrene in the university, in the words of the Minister of Universities."

The minister "launched an investigation against this gangrene, presumably to eradicate it, and accused academics of being activists and ideologues rather than scientists—totally undermining the scientific quality."

The Minister of Education "accused them of projecting a world vision that resembled that of Islamists. That declaration was made two weeks after a history teacher was decapitated by an Islamist. So you can see the threat it represented."

Post-October 7th Escalation:

Joly outlined a succession of ministerial actions that "laid a cloak of lead among researchers and university academics":

1. October 2023: Minister sent letter to all university presidents "in the name of France's solidarity with Israel to make sure they would keep tranquillity in the institution".
2. Minister Hetzel: "Requested a duty of discretion on the strength that academics are civil servants, discarding the fact that civil servants have a duty of discretion, but not academics who are protected from it by two laws and a decision of the Constitutional Council in the name of academic freedom".
3. Prime Minister Intervention: "Intervened in the Administrative Council, which he has no right to do, directly telling them that the fish is rotting from the top".
4. Law on Antisemitism: "Passed with a train of sanctions".

This induced "quite an amount of self-censorship, denunciation, intimidation, and a number of academics have been threatened, taken to the police, and one famous case taken to court for apology of terrorism."

The Collège de France Incident:

"Three days ago before I came, the Minister of Universities—yet another one, we change every two months, but they're all the same—intervened directly with a written letter to the administrator of the Collège de France, the most eminent higher education institution in France, that had programmed a large conference with international scholars, renowned scholars, on the history of Palestine. And it was banned. It's the first time he puts it in writing. In the past it was done behind the scenes."

Academic Response:

"There was a flurry of protests, still going on at the moment. Trade unions, France Universities, the Centre for National Research, and four organizations have been created in the last 3-4 years by academics themselves to defend academic freedom."

Four Priorities in Defending Academic Freedom:

Joly identified four dimensions academics prioritised in their response:

1. Protection against political interference: "You can see why, because it's cascades of them".
2. Insisting on scientific quality and integrity: "From all outside influence, including the market, but also politicians".
3. The right to choose research themes, theoretical approaches, and epistemology: "People studying Islam were accused of being Islamo-leftist or people studying the Middle East were accused of making the apology of terrorism".
4. Social responsibility of academics in delivering public goods: This manifested in demands for institutions to:
 - Call for a ceasefire in Gaza
 - End partnerships with Israeli universities and companies collaborating on weapons development

The Question of Social Responsibility:

Joly posed this for debate: "Does that pertain to academic freedom? Does that pertain to values of academic freedom?"

She supported the argument with three sources:

1. UNESCO: "Knowledge and science produced by academics must be inverted to promote progress".
2. Centre National de la Recherche (CNRS): Justified "the political role of science to participate in a world more lucid and more just".

3. CNRS Ethics Committee: Published a guide on political and social engagement of academics. Its president stated, "the right and freedom of political commitment."

The guide declares: "Science is a human enterprise nourished with values... Academics also carry values and shouldn't pretend that they don't hold any. There is no incompatibility in principle between political commitment and the quality of science... Researchers must bring a contribution to society's debates as holders of specialised knowledge."

Guidelines for Responsible Engagement:

Joly noted there are guidelines: "Scientific rigour, explicit in your own standpoint, your epistemology, situating your research, and respecting the laws. For instance, not calling for the assassination of the president."

Conclusion:

"I'm offering this for debate. I think it's well worth discussing, and everybody will agree and disagree, but that should give us some food for thought."

Iris Vernehol, Senior Policy Adviser Global Engagement, Institutional Liaison at Ruhr University Bochum and Utrecht Network

Iris Vernehol presented Ruhr University's approach to integrating values into international cooperation and building capacity among students, faculty, and staff.

Institutional Context:

"I'm working in University Administration as a senior policy advisor for global engagement, structurally located in the international office, responsible for all kinds of international and internationalisation issues, including international partnerships and collaborations, and very focused on promoting students and researchers at risk."

Ruhr University offers "a range of programs ranging from fellowships to support mechanisms," but recognized that concrete support mechanisms alone were insufficient: "We always thought it's very important not just to focus on concrete mechanisms, but also to look at the value of academic freedom vis-à-vis responsibility of academics and the university community more broadly, including students, faculty and administrative staff."

University Without Borders Program:

The program emphasizes "not just academic responsibility, but global social and civic responsibility, and that we should think these as much as possible together."

Key initiatives include:

1. Scholars at Risk Student Advocacy Seminars and Legal Clinics: Partnership program where "students actually get the opportunity to promote human rights and public policy and academic advocacy, academic freedom, but also in promotion of wrongfully imprisoned scholars, falsely displaced or otherwise exiled scholars."

Run "not as a program of a particular study program, but as a university-wide module open to bachelors, masters and early PhD students across disciplines," involving "a range of faculty from different disciplines and departments."

Importantly, "we run it together with our international partner institutions, because we believe this is an international global endeavour and we cannot do it on our own."

2. Utrecht Network Task Force: In collaboration with 30 European universities in the Utrecht Network, established a task force on "responsible internationalisation and global engagement, looking at how to promote academic freedom, solidarity and responsibility in internationalisation in a fragmented world."

Offers:

- International summer school for students and higher education professionals on human rights and public policy advocacy.
- Staff training (first held at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki in 2024).

Regional Perspectives and Dialogue:

"What's important for us is this regional perspective. What do we mean with academic freedom in our institutions? How do we understand that? What do we mean with social responsibility on a global level?"

The task force consists of University of Bologna, University College Cork, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and Ruhr University Bochum, with former involvement from University of Krakow and Strasbourg University.

They invite international networks including Worldwide Universities Network, Scholars at Risk, and the new University in Exile Consortium "to see how we can embed these kinds of things in our teaching, learning and in our staff training."

Institutional Implementation:

Vernehol referenced "the principles of academic freedom working group—the principles to implement the right to academic freedom at institutional level, Annex Two. I like Annex Two because it really sets out what can universities do, not what can governments do, not what can regional alliances do. What can universities do?"

She emphasised working with the Utrecht Network to "find out how does that relate to internationalisation, because we figure out that this is where it often starts. First we have the geopolitical fragmentation. We had the wars going on, conflicts in different countries. We had a large influx of scholars and students at risk, which we all host as much as possible."

The Need for Dialogue:

"What we found important is that we really do it together and really reflect on the values. What do we mean by it? What do our partners mean? Because what we figured out is we don't know what we mean with academic freedom. That is something we need to discuss."

Vernekhhol noted: "There are efforts at the EU level, but what does it mean at the institutional level? We have a codex on academic freedom and diversity at our university, but this is also very short and concise. I hope in the near future we are having a whole process starting to discuss how we can—what do we mean by academic freedom, diversity and civic global responsibility—and then to see how can we implement it into the institution."

Closing Remarks

Secretary General David Lock provided practical information for the signing ceremony the following day and thanked all participants for their engagement.

The conference concluded with recognition that while universities face unprecedented challenges to their autonomy and values, collective action through international cooperation, institutional commitment, and student engagement offers pathways to defend and strengthen academic freedom and university autonomy.

As Professor van't Land emphasized in her closing: "Universities and other higher education institutions shape, transform and contribute to building more democratic, just and sustainable societies. In fragmented times, university associations have a special role as spaces of mediation, where the exercise of rights and the fulfilment of obligations meet in the shared pursuit of truth, human dignity and global solidarity."

A recording of the Conference session can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29mgJgzA8Yg&t=3s>

Thursday 13 November 2025

Ceremony for the Signature of the Magna Charta Universitatum

The Magna Charta Observatory's most significant ceremony took place at King's College London, marking a historic milestone as the 1,000th university joined the global community of signatories committed to academic freedom and institutional autonomy. The ceremony was held in the magnificent chapel of King's College, with participants attending both in person and joining online from around the world.

Welcoming Addresses

Mr. David Lock, Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory, opened the ceremony by welcoming participants to this most significant event of the Observatory. He explained that the ceremony would culminate with the signing to mark the accession of 64 universities. Mr. Lock reminded the gathering that the Magna Charta Universitatum was first signed in 1988 by 388 rectors of universities gathered in Bologna to mark the ninth centenary of the Alma Mater, and that it reflects the fundamental values of the university tradition and promotes the reinforcement of links between universities.

The Vice-Chancellor and President of King's College London warmly welcomed all colleagues and friends – vice-chancellors, rectors, principals and presidents – thanking them for having joined the proceedings over the previous two days. He stressed that it was indeed a privilege for King's to host the gathering, particularly for such an important element of the meeting when new universities choose to accede to the Magna Charta.

The Vice-Chancellor shared the historical significance of the venue, explaining that when King's was founded, there was a great debate in England about the place of knowledge. "King's was founded on the ethos of knowledge with purpose," he explained. He described how the main building was designed with statues of "holiness and wisdom" at the entrance, with the great hall for professors and debates below, and the chapel positioned above to signify that there is a purpose which knowledge must serve.

"Gathering here gives us in these beautiful surroundings to actually reflect on the purpose, the values, the beliefs that the Magna Charta tries to serve," the Vice-Chancellor continued. "As we said at the start, it is a compass, and I think it is to in many ways reinforce our commitment to that compass that we gather here."

He concluded with a touching anecdote about King's beginnings: "When King's started, there were six professors, one principal and one dean. So there were just eight faculty members of this great university, and each of them had a stall. If you turn around and look, you'll see there are eight wooden stalls and their names are still there. All the professoriate used to fit there, and all the students used to fit in the benches here. Well, how times have changed."

Professor Giovanni Molari, Magnificent Rector of the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna and President of the Magna Charta Observatory, addressed the gathering with a profound sense of responsibility. He extended warm welcomes to this distinguished gathering and thanked King's College for their hospitality during the fantastic three days of the conference.

Prof. Molari emphasised that this year's anniversary held particular significance as it took place in a very difficult and fragile global scenario where conflicts and tensions are increasing and human rights are being challenged. "We are experiencing that the democratic values we embrace can never be taken for granted once and for all. Not even in contexts in which they have had a long history and look soundly established in the academic setting. Academic freedom and institutional autonomy are to be forcefully defended more than ever, and jointly so."

He quoted Josep Borrell, former Vice-President of the European Commission, who recently stated at the General Assembly of the European Universities Alliance in Madrid: "Universities are a permanent consortium for dialogue. Dialogue is crucial in this present context in which democratic fatigue is experienced." Borrell had continued by remarking that "insofar as we share values, we share vulnerabilities as well. However, standing up for values together makes us stronger."

Prof. Molari stressed that universities are not supposed to be only engaged in theoretical defense of academic autonomy and freedom of research as single institutions, but must collectively translate such defenses into concrete joint actions. "With pluralism, mobility and inclusivity being challenged, only by working closely together and assigning equal goals will we reduce fragility of academic systems and, through them, benefit societies."

He emphasized that the Magna Charta Universitatum, founded by the University of Bologna in 1988, has grown into a global alliance with more than 1,000 institutions. "Its extension is surely an achievement we are all proud of, but it also requires deeper and deeper sensitivity to both local and global needs, struggles, distinctive features and resources. We constitute a unique hub for dialogue across countries and cultures which needs to act in practice."

Prof. Molari highlighted that whereas universities in the Northern hemisphere have been recently accused of being distant from the real world, in other scenarios, universities have actually been the institutions making the real world what it currently is. "In various contexts, universities have been fighting for society, progress, freedom of speech, free voting, public education, and public health. Academics have thus paved their way to societal transformation."

He concluded with a powerful call to action: "As we navigate the present, we must reflect both on the role each of our academic institutions is playing in shaping the future of our own countries, and on the role that the Magna Charta Observatory is supposed to play as a joint institution. We should question how Magna Charta is impacting the troubled and crumbling context we are facing, and what prospects we are envisaging and what tentative solutions we are designing. As single institutions, we are already authoritative. We should be committed to making the Magna Charta amplify our voices, make them speak as one, to be heard more and more clearly. May we make our commitment to shared values transcend geographical and political boundaries, building bridges across countries. May our joint reflection be both inspiring and truly impactful as current times require. May we learn to be not only advocates of values, but also alert sentinels capable of understanding facts, foreseeing risks, and affecting trends on academic freedom and autonomy."

Keynote Address

Mr. Sjur Bergan, former Head of the Education Department at the Council of Europe, delivered the keynote address, focusing on the critical importance of the Magna Charta Universitatum in today's challenging global context.

Mr. Bergan began by acknowledging that while the occasion for the gathering – universities signing a document – may seem trivial, it is anything but. "The Magna Charta Universitatum is no ordinary document. Its name is inspired by one of the key stops on our long march toward democracy. The original Magna Carta was, of course, developed and signed in England in 1215. Its importance, however, is not only English, it is not only European, it is global."

He explained that the 1988 version of the Magna Charta Universitatum was appropriately adopted and signed by the first 388 rectors at a gathering in Bologna marking the ninth centenary of our oldest university. "The importance of this document too is both European and global. It has since been complemented but not replaced by another Magna Charta Universitatum – the 2020 version – and the original 388 signatories have been joined by more than 600 others. The 36 universities that signed the Magna Charta Universitatum today therefore join a growing global family of institutions committed to academic freedom and institutional autonomy."

Mr. Bergan noted that today the Magna Charta Universitatum passes the milestone of 1,000 signatories, making the occasion appropriately festive. However, he cautioned, "The situation of academic freedom and institutional autonomy is far less so. There is every reason for

universities to rally around the Magna Charta Universitatum. There is also every reason for public authorities and society at large to honour it, to cherish it, and to help put it into practice."

He emphasised that academic freedom and institutional autonomy are, along with other fundamental values of higher education, essential not only to higher education but to our societies. "Without academic freedom and institutional autonomy, we cannot have high-quality learning, teaching and research. Without academic freedom and institutional autonomy, we also cannot have a fully functioning democracy."

Mr. Bergan made a pointed observation: "There are few governments and institutions that would not aspire to equality. There should be no fewer governments and institutions that do not aim for democracy. No rector will admit to aspiring for second best. Some governments are, alas, unapologetic about aiming for the worst when speaking about democracy."

He explained that when speaking about democracy, he was not speaking only of institutions and laws, of parliaments and constitutions and the original Magna Carta. "I am also speaking about the need to develop and maintain a culture of democracy – the set of attitudes and behaviours that enable institutions, laws and elections to be democratic in practice." This includes welcoming diversity of opinions and cultures as a strength, settling disputes by the force of argument rather than by a call to arms, accepting that while majorities decide, minorities have inalienable rights, and believing that the greatness of a society is measured by the vitality of its civil society rather than by the size of its army.

Mr. Bergan addressed the Council of Europe's long-standing concern about the backlash against democracy. "Populism, authoritarianism and nationalism are not only in the streets, but also in parliaments and governments, and in some cases, weapons speak more loudly than reason." He cited the military attacks on higher education in Ukraine, Gaza, and the eradication of Armenian higher education in Nagorno-Karabakh as examples.

"In other cases, belligerent rhetoric speaks more to people than does sustained reflection. It seems easier to appeal to people to hate others than to love their neighbours," he continued. "There are many reasons to be wary of political extremism. One is that many populists pretend that academically based knowledge and understanding are inconsequential to the decisions we need to make as societies. Granted, most populists would use other words, but their intentions are clear. They would replace Descartes' 'I think, therefore I am' by 'I feel, therefore I must rule unquestioned and unchallenged.'"

Mr. Bergan noted that the examples of the danger of trusting political leaders who disregard elementary facts are too numerous to cite, and pointed out that the Covid pandemic showed the danger of failing to trust vaccines and, therefore academic knowledge and understanding.

He highlighted a concerning trend: "It is symptomatic that when we spoke to higher education leaders as part of our drafting guiding principles on fundamental academic values for the European Commission, one of the strongest messages that we received was on the need to establish protection for members of the academic community who came under attack because of their work, whether on the Middle East or on vaccines, whether because they challenged interests that are economically dominant, socially hegemonic or environmentally unsustainable."

Mr. Bergan stressed that the challenge to academic freedom and institutional autonomy does not come from the extreme right and the extreme left alone. He shared an example from his home country, Norway, where a mainstream party argued during its election campaign that "political authorities must play a stronger role in determining what study programmes society really needs" and that "we need less nonsense academic disciplines." He noted the irony that the same party strongly argues that public authorities do not have the knowledge required to manage and set priorities for business.

He also recalled how in the 1980s, a government launched a campaign to reform the public sector with the slogan "The New State," without sufficient knowledge of history to question the choice of a slogan that some 50 years earlier had been used by Salazar in Portugal, Mussolini in Italy, and Vargas in Brazil. "The so-called nonsense subjects could perhaps have saved them from both inconsistency of argument and ignorance of association."

Addressing the "ivory tower" metaphor often used by those who do not understand or fear higher education and research, Mr. Bergan stated: "The ivory tower has never been a truthful image of the university. Had it been, universities would not have survived as our leading model of knowledge discovery and dissemination for close to a millennium. Universities would not have survived as places not only of learning, but as that broader concept for which many languages lack a suitable term – Bildung."

He acknowledged that while the ivory tower is not an accurate metaphor, some universities do act as if it were. "Academic freedom and university autonomy require independence. They neither require nor sustain isolation. Universities do need to maintain some distance to the everyday hustle and bustle that rule our lives. They nevertheless need to be in and of society."

Mr. Bergan emphasized that universities must not only adapt to societal developments, they must also influence and lead those developments and the values on which they build. "They need to engage in and with society, and not leave the scene to those who seek simplistic short-term patches to complex problems. Universities need to help students develop the competencies they need to weigh short-term prejudice against long-term gain and sustainability. Universities need to put their academically based knowledge and understanding to work not just in, but with the local societies of which every university is a part. Universities need to help build the environmental, societal, cultural, economic and political sustainability on which our future depends."

He posed two critical questions: "If universities cannot do this, who will? If universities are unwilling to do this, who could?"

Mr. Bergan stressed that the Magna Charta Universitatum is "a call to engagement, not to retreat. It is a call to doing as well as to being, to action as well as reflection. As members of the academic community, we must commit to helping develop our society locally, nationally and globally. We offer advanced, high-quality knowledge and understanding combined with a set of values for the betterment of our societies. We not only train highly qualified subject specialists, we educate intellectuals, by which I mean people who can take their subject-specific knowledge, put it into a broader context, ask the critical questions and answer those questions. For this, we need academic freedom and institutional autonomy not as a privilege, but as a service to society."

Mr. Bergan concluded with two illustrative quotes. The first from Ambrose Bierce, the US journalist and satirist, who defined education in his Devil's Dictionary as "that which reveals to the wise and hides from the foolish their lack of understanding." The second from Chilean sociologist Eugenio Tironi, who maintained that "in order to answer the question 'what kind of education do we need?' we first need to answer another question: 'what kind of society do we want?'"

"That question, ladies and gentlemen, cannot leave universities indifferent. That question cannot be answered without their full commitment and engagement. That question cannot be answered except on the basis of the values that the Magna Charta Universitatum incarnates," Mr. Bergan stated.

He ended with congratulations and a call to action: "Congratulations to the 36 universities signing the Magna Charta Universitatum today. Congratulations to the Magna Charta Observatory for its persistent work to further academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Congratulations and a big thank you to King's College London for hosting its annual conference. Congratulations and a big thank you to David Lock, to Liviu Matei and all the others who made this meeting possible. May this conference and this magnificent ceremony inspire us to work even harder, even smarter, and even more fearlessly to further academic freedom and institutional autonomy. May this ceremony inspire us to make the Magna Charta Universitatum a set of living values."

Signing of the Magna Charta Universitatum

Mr. David Lock announced that the ceremony had reached the point when the Magna Charta Universitatum would be signed. The Vice-Chancellor and President of King's College London, the Magnificent Rector of the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, and the President of the Governing Council of the Magna Charta Observatory welcomed the new signatories.

The following 36 universities signed the Magna Charta Universitatum for the first time:

- Mediterranean University of Albania
- Murdoch University, Australia
- University of Shumen, Bulgaria
- University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic
- Université de Lorraine, France
- Chemnitz University of Technology, Germany
- University of the Aegean, Greece
- Adamas University, India
- University of Siena (University for Foreigners of Siena), Italy
- Klaipeda University, Lithuania
- University of Southeastern Norway, Norway
- VID Specialized University, Norway
- Jan Kochanowski University, Poland
- University of Thrace, Greece
- Pomeranian University, Poland
- Karol Lipiński Academy of Music in Wrocław, Poland
- University of Białystok, Poland
- University of Rzeszów, Poland
- ISCTE - University Institute of Lisbon, Portugal

- Lusofona University, Portugal
- Durban University of Technology, South Africa
- First Valencia International University, Spain
- Dalarna University, Sweden (the 1,000th signatory)
- Swedish Defence University, Sweden
- University of Borås, Sweden
- Università della Svizzera Italiana, Switzerland
- TOBB University of Economics and Technology, Turkey
- Istanbul University, Turkey
- Sabancı University, Turkey
- Yeditepe University, Turkey
- Clark University, United States
- Poltava State Agrarian University, Ukraine
- King's College London, United Kingdom
- University of Stirling, United Kingdom

Additionally, the following universities that had previously signed the Magna Charta Universitatum virtually during Covid times came forward to sign in person:

- University of Andorra, Andorra
- American International University, Bangladesh
- University of Toronto, Canada
- University of Waterloo, Canada
- University of the Faroe Islands, Faroe Islands
- Ilia State University, Georgia
- Humboldt University Berlin, Germany
- Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece
- National University of Public Service, Hungary
- University of Mons, Belgium
- Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, Lithuania
- University of Malta, Malta
- University of Stavanger, Norway
- Kraków University of Economics, Poland
- Warsaw University of Technology, Poland
- National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest, Romania
- Trnava University, Slovakia
- University of Priština, Kosovo
- University of Barcelona, Spain
- Lund University, Sweden
- University of Gothenburg, Sweden
- University of Amsterdam, Netherlands
- Karlsruhe Institute of Technology, Germany
- Boston University, United States
- Yuriy Fedkovych Chernivtsi National University, Ukraine
- University of Aberdeen, United Kingdom

This historic ceremony marked the achievement of 1,000 signatories to the Magna Charta Universitatum, with Dalarna University from Sweden being recognized as the milestone 1,000th signatory.

Address on Behalf of New Signatories

Professor Andrew Deeks, Vice-Chancellor and President of Murdoch University, Australia, addressed the gathering on behalf of the new signatories.

Prof. Deeks expressed profound honour to speak on behalf of the new signatories of the Magna Charta Universitatum. "On behalf of Murdoch University and the 35 institutions joining for the first time, as well as those reaffirming their commitment, I extend our deepest gratitude to the Observatory for welcoming us into this global community of universities."

He thanked the conveners, the guardians of this tradition and all those who have sustained the Magna Charta since 1988. "Your stewardship has ensured that the values of academic freedom, institutional autonomy and the responsibility to society remain at the heart of higher education worldwide."

Prof. Deeks emphasised that for Murdoch University and all institutions signing that day, the decision was not taken lightly. "It reflects a conscious commitment to align our institutional identity with principles that transcend borders, cultures and political contexts. We signed because we believe universities must be more than transmitters of knowledge. They must be stewards of truth, places where ideas can be contested freely, and engines of innovation to serve humanity."

He noted that in a time when higher education faces pressures from economic, technological and geopolitical forces, the Magna Charta reminds universities of their enduring responsibilities: "to safeguard academic freedom as the cornerstone of discovery, to uphold autonomy as a condition for integrity, and to serve society not just through skills and research, but through wisdom and ethical leadership."

Prof. Deeks stressed that the Magna Charta is not simply a document, it is a living covenant. "Its 2020 edition recognizes the challenging landscape of our world: the digital transformation of education, the urgency of sustainability and the need for universities to act as global citizens. By signing, we are affirming that universities must embrace diversity and inclusion as strengths, collaborate across borders to address global challenges, and model governance that is transparent, accountable and future-orientated."

He explained why the Magna Charta matters more today than ever: "It is both an anchor and a compass – anchoring us in timeless values while guiding us towards new responsibilities."

On behalf of the new signatories, Prof. Deeks thanked the Magna Charta Observatory for its vision and dedication: "You created a space where universities can come together not only to declare shared principles, but to learn from one another, to challenge one another and to inspire one another." He also thanked colleagues from institutions that signed the original Magna Charta in 1988: "Your example has paved the way for us, and your decision to reaffirm through the 2020 edition shows that these principles are not static. They evolve, deepen, and remain relevant across generations."

Prof. Deeks concluded with a pledge: "As we add our names today, we do so with humility and with resolve. We know that signing is not the end of a process, but the beginning of a responsibility. Together as universities across continents and traditions, we pledge to uphold the values of the Magna Charta in our teaching, our research and our service to society. We

pledge to defend academic freedom wherever it is threatened, to nurture autonomy wherever it is challenged, and to act with integrity whenever tested. May this ceremony remind us that while universities are diverse in mission and in context, we are united in purpose. May the Magna Charta continue to be a beacon for higher education in a world that needs wisdom, courage, and collaboration more than ever before."

Concluding Remarks

Dr. Patrick Deane, President of the Governing Council of the Magna Charta Observatory, addressed the gathering with closing remarks.

Dr. Deane began with humour: "I'll be honest, I have no idea how you follow a performance of Bruckner like that. Congratulations and thank you very much to the choir and thank you to the organist for the marvellous accompaniments today."

He reflected on Sjur Bergan's opening question about what is significant about universities lining up to sign a document. "Indeed, at one level, compared to the complicated issues we all deal with every day on our campuses, in our interactions with government, in our interactions with various constituencies in our universities, this moment of pausing to watch as colleagues from so many universities put their signatures on the document is a remarkably simple moment by comparison. I would say that is why it is so important."

Dr. Deane noted that over the last couple of days, participants had spent considerable time and intellectual energy wrestling with the challenges of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. "I think we've had to reckon with the rather dark picture of what seems to lie ahead, but is certainly prevailing at the moment. And I've really admired colleagues for the quality of our discussion over the last several days, and it all bodes very well for the quality of our engagement with these issues when we all leave this place and move on. So I thank you for that."

He observed the evolution of the ceremony's atmosphere: "I did happen to notice, until the Bruckner was performed, that this ceremony went from great gravity as we all processed in to a kind of loosening up. There were some selfies taken at the end, you'll have noticed, and I think there's something very appropriate about that fusion of solemnity with exuberance."

Dr. Deane explained the significance of this combination: "I think it speaks to the university mission, which is gravely serious because of its linkage to human justice, democracy around the planet and so on. So it is enormously serious, but it is also – for all of us who are engaged in working with students in universities, with young people, and with researchers pushing the boundaries of knowledge around the world for the betterment of humanity and the planet – a matter of great exuberance. So while we're very solemn here today, and it is an important solemn occasion, I invite you all to celebrate outrageously once we leave this room."

He continued: "There's a lot to celebrate. The power of universities to do the work they do, to transform society, to make fulfilling lives for our students and academic colleagues. And I also want to say, just in closing on this, how encouraging and enriching it is to feel collegiality that goes around the globe in this room – institutions from all over the globe, all engaged in different ways, in different contexts, in pursuit of the same goals, which are the kinds of goals that do uplift humanity and hold out hope for all of us."

Dr. Deane concluded with warm congratulations: "My warmest congratulations to all the signatories today, my gratitude to you for signing and for engaging with us in the discussion this last couple of days. I want to thank, as has been done a number of times, but it does bear repeating, thanks to King's College London for hosting us. I think this is a very fitting end to our time here. So thanks to the folks at King's College and also to members of the Governing Council for their support, and to all of you for coming and contributing to the very, very noble and critical cause that we all espouse. So thank you very much."

A recording of the Ceremony can be viewed at:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9V8ACdYoMs>