Magna Charta Observatory
Anniversary Conference 2026
Reports delivered by the President of the Governing Council and Secretary General
14 October 2026

Opening Remarks by Patrick Deane, President of the Governing Council

I'm sorry that I am not able to be with you in person this year, especially as this my last year as President of the Governing Council of the MCO.

What I would like to do is to share some reflections on the period since I became President of the Governing Council back in March 2021 and then hand to the Secretary General to talk us through the achievements of this year and where we are heading.

The changes that are happening in our society, particularly concerning our climate, growing inequality and rapidly advancing technology, require universities all around the world to play a greater role in researching, educating and informing both the policy and implementation debates. However, universities in many countries are finding it more difficult to do this because of the political environments in which they work, diminishing trust in experts, and limitations on resources or their freedom, despite calls for more people to have access to tertiary education. Navigating this and leading universities has become one of the most challenging roles in society.

Hence, the fundamental values that have served universities well for many years assume more importance.

It was in 2018 that I was asked to join a small group which was established to review the values set out in the 1988 MCU. They were felt to have served well but had become dated, and eighteen months of stimulating global enquiry and refinement of the MCU followed.

When it was published in 2021, the new MCU took nothing away from the 1988 original, but recognised that it was the pursuit of the values, including autonomy and academic freedom, that should be emphasised, rather than the notion that they could be fully attained. Greater emphasis was placed on universities serving societies, to help them to be more recognised for addressing the world's challenges.

The MCO remains a very small body, but I have seen its influence grow significantly over the last six years.

I have seen the Magna Charta Observatory advancing from a primary focus on promoting the MCU document, developing advocacy and underlining the aspirational role of the document, to focusing much more on *how* it is put into practice in universities and *how* it enables universities to have greater impact and make a greater contribution to society.

Last year at the equivalent of this event in London, the MCO exceeded 1000 signatories, making it one of the largest global higher education bodies. I have also witnessed it diversifying its activities to provide practical help to universities, through its Living Values Project, its work with students, especially its essay competition to engage the next generation and its 'responsive and responsible university' research project, about which you will hear more later in this conference.

I should like to thank all the global and national bodies and universities that have collaborated with the MCO in delivering these projects and outcomes, including our founding parents the University of Bologna and the European University Association and the host of this year's Anniversary event Mykolas Romeris University. I should also like to thank the Secretary General and Administrator and the many people who have worked with us voluntarily, be that as a member of our Governing Council, an Ambassador or through engagement in one of our many projects.

I would now like to hand over to the Secretary General to say more about our work over the last 12 months.

2026 Annual report of the Secretary General

Thank you, Patrick, and may I, before sharing our report, pay tribute to your leadership of the Governing Council over the last six years. It is not as easy as you make it look, but you have enabled the MCO to navigate complexities and become the strategic partner of choice, and I am sure that members of the Governing Council and our signatories and partners will join me in thanking you most warmly for all that you have done for the MCO.

It is my pleasure to present a review of what your Observatory has achieved in 2026. Last year I shared with you the five 'spokes' of our strategy for the period 2025 -30.

This year I'm pleased to share that good progress is being made in three of the five areas.

The **Living Values project** continues to attract global interest with requests for presentations and the start, only yesterday, of a capacity-building programme for leaders of universities that wish to implement it. We shall continue, through our ambassadors, to work with universities to enable that methodology to have greater impact and engage with other organisations to promote it where that is appropriate.

Our **next generation work** continues to grow. Three years ago, we signed an MoU with the Global Student Forum in addition to our work with the European Students Union. We are now pleased to be working with GSF on their Next Level Leadership programme (NELS) about which you hear more later this afternoon.

But in terms of scale, a success that we celebrate in 2026 is the record entry to the **student essay competition**. Up from 94 entries in 2025, 228 students from 44 countries entered the competition this year and the judges reported that the standard of essays was the highest yet. We are grateful to the World Access to Higher Education Network for their partnership and financial support in enabling the 5 winners to fly to Sydney, Australia to participate in the World Access to Higher Education Network (WAHEN) and the Equity Practitioners in Higher Education Association conferences and other events from 22 to 26 November 2026. We are going to publish at least the winning essays. I would like to thank the 12 volunteers who judged the competition this year. They had a much larger task than we were anticipating. Later this afternoon we will be meeting Okechukwu Izuchukwu, one of the winners from 2025 who was unfortunately not able to take up his prize last year.

The research strand of our work has seen the **Responsive and Responsible University project** come almost to fruition with the text having been approved by our Research Committee and a publisher selected. The book will contain six case studies. One from our hosts, Mykolas Romeris University, will feature later this afternoon. We were also due to have with us the former Vice-Chancellor of the American University in Bangladesh, whose project based on the pedagogic and cross-curricular innovations in AIUB has been praised by international higher education audiences in Japan, Georgia, Lithuania and Dhaka when it was featured in MCO presentations. The project was submitted for the first Impact Summit jointly organised by the Association of Universities of Asia and the Pacific (AUAP), the World University Rankings for Innovation (WURI), and AI-Stat, South Korea, which was held on 9–10 July 2026 at ICONSIAM, Bangkok, Thailand. Under the theme, *"University Innovation in Partnership with Government: Policy, Mechanism, and Impact.* Following a peer-review process, the project was selected for the summit, and presented during the two-day event. The title was "AIUB and the Magna Charta Universitatum Observatory (MCO): A Transformative Model for Responsible and Responsive Higher Education." The AIUB-MCO research project achieved 3rd place among more than 120 projects submitted for the summit, recognising AIUB's commitment to responsible, innovative, community-engaged, and globally responsive higher education. We congratulate Carmen Lamagna and her team on both their success and thank them for their significant contribution to the work of the MCO.

I'm pleased to say that we will be interviewing for a research and communications officer on 27 October, and once that post has been filled, we can look forward to much greater output from our research collaborations.

You will have noticed from the projects above, that the MCO is increasingly working in partnership with other international, regional bodies and universities that share its values. This is most often by invitation, and it is enabling your small body to have greater impact.

Later this afternoon you will hear about the €1.6m Democratic Role of Universities project in which the MCO has been invited to be an Associate Partner. The insight from the project will be featured in future MCO events and the learning from the research will be enriching our website.

The MCO is a member of the Global Cooperation & International Consortium Steering Committee and is collaborating with it in the production of a global event in 2028. This is in response to the highly successful event held in Prague last year.

The MCO was invited to join the newly formed Global Innovation Circle on Higher Education and has participated in both of its meetings, most recently "Science and Diplomacy in Times of Disruption" and "Global Research Collaboration in times of geopolitical fragmentation". Two events are planned for 2027 in which the MCO will be participating.

These are in addition to our partnerships with our co-founder, the European University Association, with which we are planning a webinar for 12 March 2027, the International Association of Universities, in whose conference we will be hosting a session in Perth in early November, Scholars at Risk, whose Advisory Committee we contribute to, the Association of Arab Universities and other collaborative events.

Given the success of this collaborative activity, I am delighted to advise that we will be signing an MoU with EWORA, the European Women's Rectors Association in our ceremony on Friday. They invited the MCO to contribute to a major conference in Lisbon last year when the benefits of collaboration became apparent. We were pleased to be invited to give a keynote address in the CIVIS Alliance meeting in Bucharest in June and to speak in the UNICA meeting in London in May. Both of those organisations will be participating in our programme tomorrow and will be signing collaboration agreements with us in 2027.

Finally, it is largely people, not organisations, that enable things to happen and I would like to conclude to paying tribute to and thanking people to whom the MCO is indebted.

Very sadly, Professor **Fabio Roversi Monaco**, promoter of the Magna Charta Universitatum and the Magna Charta Observatory during his 15 years as Rector of the University of Bologna from 1985 until 2000, passed away on 27 March 2026. His legacy is huge and we will hopefully find a way of honouring his memory so that future generations can be aware of his massive contribution to higher education globally.

The MCO is greatly indebted to its 1011 signatories (due to become 1018 on Friday) who it both serves and is facilitated by. Regular listeners to my reviews will now be expecting a call for you to be generous in supporting us financially. But, if so, I shall disappoint you. Signatories have this year given more than ever before and we appreciate that greatly. As a result of this, we are in the process of recruiting a research and communications officer whom we expect to increase our capacity to take forward our strategy and serve you better in future.

Early in 2026, signatories were invited to advise us on what our priorities should be. Strengthening autonomy and safeguarding academic freedom in environments that were becoming increasingly difficult and more regulated were their main concerns. Building public trust and demonstrating social responsibility were other major concerns, along with responding to the rise of populism.

The question ‘how to make the MCU a living document with impact on everyday activities, teaching and research’ and similar remarks pointed to an event that was very practical in its focus. Strengthening democracy through student engagement in curricular design and research was another desire.

Other challenges were in the area of technology, AI, raising quality, quality assurance, safeguarding integrity, increasing international collaboration, including academic mobility for students and generally in ensuring sustainability.

I would like to thank our Anniversary hosts, Mykolas Romeris University, for working with us so well to prepare and deliver the priorities that signatories identified and the University of Bologna for their support.

It is planned that the 2027 Anniversary will be held in Bologna. In 2028, the MCO will be 40 years old, and we would welcome expressions of interest in hosting that special event from signatory universities.

Returning to my thanks, our MCO Ambassadors, who are engaged in supporting research projects as well as universities undertaking the Living Values project and providing advice when situations of concern arise in different parts of the world, play an increasingly valuable role. I thank my colleague Carla Pazzaglia, our administrator. I thank the governing council and its committees for all that they contribute. Giga Zedania and Catharine Stimpson have led our research and admissions committees, respectively and we are most grateful to them. Members of the council have represented the Observatory at various meetings, and I would like to thank Liviu Matei, our newly elected Vice-President, for speaking at a number of events in countries including the US, Romania, and here in Vilnius. Martina Darmanin and Peter Kwasi Kodjie are overseeing our next generations strand. Liviu, Martina and Giga are with us here in Vilnius. Chris Brink and Patrick Deane will be leading our presence at the IAU meeting in Perth next month.

I thank Patrick again for all that he has done for the MCO and also Astrid Söderbergh Widding, for her valuable service as Vice-President of the Governing Council until well after moving on from her role at Stockholm University.

Finally, I would like to thank you, our signatories and collaborating organisations. The task that we have is huge, and it is not getting any easier. But together we can face it and make an impression in upholding the principles, values and responsibilities that we have signed up to that are now more important than ever.

DJL
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