

Is there a need to reimagine academic freedom?

The MCO exists to 'play an active role in guaranteeing the respect, protection and promotion of the fundamental values and university rights established by the Magna Charta Universitatum, which was first signed in Bologna by 388 university rectors in 1988'. It was an initiative of universities and was written, in Latin, by 8, male, European Rectors.

Academic Freedom is the 3rd fundamental principle.

*'Freedom in research and training is **the** fundamental principle of university life, and governments and universities, each as far as in them lies, must ensure respect for this fundamental requirement. Rejecting intolerance and always open to dialogue, a university is an ideal meeting-ground for teachers capable of imparting their knowledge and well equipped to develop it by research and innovation and for students entitled, able and willing to enrich their minds with that knowledge.'*

MCU 1988 served well for 30 years and there was growing support for it. As at September this year 960 universities from 94 different countries have now signed the MCU. However, the world had changed since 1988.

It has become interconnected in ways unimaginable at the time of the original declaration.

Universities have proliferated around the globe, dramatically increasing in variety as well as scope and mission.

Globally the number and diversity of students seeking a university education has increased, as have their reasons for doing so and the expectations of their families and communities.

The number of publications has increased enormously - while trust in academia is being eroded by a loss of confidence in expertise.

With new technologies, modes of learning, teaching and research are changing rapidly;

Universities are both leading and responding to these developments.

Despite these changes, the potential of higher education to be a positive agent of change and social transformation endures.

Hence, in 2017 the MCO started a process of international consultation as a prelude to revising the 1988 document.

Time does not permit me to share the details of the findings – but sufficient to say that universities prioritised different values and there were different interpretations of the concept of academic freedom in different regions of the world arising from their different cultures, geography and history.

What resulted from this consultation was a new MCU, drafted by a more diverse globally representative group, which is known as 'MCU 2020'. This took nothing away from the 1988 principles and values but added several clauses as to how universities might form a reliable social contract with civil society.

Regarding academic freedom MCU 2020 says:

'As they create and disseminate knowledge, universities question dogmas and established doctrines and encourage critical thinking in all students and scholars. Academic freedom is their lifeblood; open enquiry and dialogue their nourishment.'

Realising that the signature of a declaration is not sufficient alone the MCO has also developed the **Living Values project** which assists universities in ensuring that its values are the right ones for it, that staff and students are involved in their development and delivery and that the university operates and delivers in accordance with its values.

So, to return to the question *'Is there a need to reimagine academic freedom?'* - the global experience of the Magna Charta Observatory is that the concept remains sound but it needs to be exercised effectively in the cultural context of each university if it is to, in the words of MCU 2020, 'strengthen the role of universities in the preservation of the planet and promoting health, prosperity, and enlightenment around the world'.

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