

## Universities and Re-Construction of Cities: the Role of Research and Education

*Report of the World Café Sessions*

### Table 1: Student Perspectives on Engaging with Society and Reconstruction

*Host: Peter Kwasi Kodjie, member of the MCO Governing Council*

*Rapporteur: Julia Berruezo, MCO Research Assistant*

The purpose of the table was to have the winners of the first Magna Charta Student Essay Competition present and discuss their essays. The guiding question of the essay competition was: “How might students exercise more influence in enabling their universities to make a more effective contribution to society? The idea of the competition was to allow the students to dialogue with the principles contained in the document and their own experiences to reflect on the topic.

This World Café session, the first to be broadcast live, was an opportunity for the five winners of the competition to share their ideas and personal experiences on the topic and reflect further on the role of universities and students in contributing to society. Moreover, the students were invited to propose suggestions on how these two can better collaborate in the future and promote positive results to society. During the discussion, the chair guided the students with the following questions:

1. In what ways do you believe universities currently make effective contributions to society, and where do you see room for improvement?
2. How can students, both individually and collectively, influence university governance structures to better align with societal needs?
3. Reflecting on the MCU 2020 statement about universities' responsibility to engage with society and its reconstruction, how can students play a proactive role in ensuring this responsibility is met?
4. What innovative methods or approaches have you encountered or propose that students can adopt to enable universities to engage more effectively with society?
5. Considering the various ways students can engage (e.g., student unions, class groups, protests), which do you believe has the most significant impact on university policies and practices, and why?

The session started with the chair congratulating the winners, and a round of presentations. The winning students were:

- Christina Williams, Norman Manley Law School, Jamaica
- Diana Stefanova-Slobodiana, Pavlo Tychyna Uman State Pedagogical University, Ukraine

- Ernesto Fabbri, Alma Mater Studiorum - University of Bologna, Italy
- Jayson Pasaol, Wrocław University of Environmental and Life Sciences, Poland
- Pamela Eyre Victoria Lira, University of the Philippines Diliman, Philippines

After their personal introduction, the students highlighted the key ideas of their winning essays. The students stressed the importance of the exercise of reflecting on the role of the universities towards the surrounding communities, which the essay competition allowed them to do.

During their speeches, the students mentioned the impact of the essay competition in bringing awareness of the Magna Charta Universitatum and the work of the Magna Charta Observatory to their regions. Christina Williams mentioned that Magna Charta is not very well known in the region that she is from, even though the principles contained in the document are important. Therefore, the participation in the essay competition was also perceived as a possibility of spreading MCU message in the region, while also allowing her to bring the perspective from someone from The Caribbean, and experiences from there to other parts of the world. In other words, the essay competition was perceived as a channel and a tool to create partnerships.

In addition, the students discussed the role of universities in shaping students not only as degree holders but as active and conscientious citizens. About that, Pamela Lira stressed the importance of the universities to support student organizations, allowing them to be part of the decisions taken at the university governance level. The students should both feel safe to express their perspectives and to perceive that they are being heard. Along the same lines, Diana Stefanova-Slobodiana, affirmed that the students should not be perceived as mere, in her words: “consumers of education, but active participants of the educational process”. In her opinion, it is not only necessary to give voice to the students but also to develop their leadership skills, increasing the impact of their actions. Moreover, she recommended that universities and students make use of international cooperation and technology to contribute to promote change, citing their potential to facilitate the exchange of knowledge and to strengthen networks. Having stronger networks would be particularly important for example in the context of threats to democracy, attacks to education, wars, among others.

Ernesto Fabbri also stressed this idea of having the students as active parts of the university environment, mentioning that university courses should be structured to guarantee that what the students are studying is dialoguing directly with a problem of the community. Christina Williams and Jayson Pasaol in their speeches also argued in favour of the inclusion of social engagement in the curricula of higher education institutions, affirming that the universities, in different fields, should guarantee that all the students are aware of the situation of their surroundings and are capable of forming informed opinions about social matters. Pasaol, in his speech, commented on the differences of the understanding of social responsibility and engagement of universities in different countries. In his essay, he compared the Philippines,

his home country and where he concluded his bachelors, and Poland, where he is now pursuing his PhD degree. He also mentioned the importance of closing the gap between academia and the real world, and the importance of partnerships between universities and communities to directly answer the needs of the communities.

Another point brought by Fabri was the necessity of the universities to translate the MCU principles into reality in their plans of action, affirming that their agreement with the MCU principles have to be reflected in the way they interact with the students and the society as a whole. Complementing this idea, Christina Williams discussed the necessity of the establishment of systems for making the universities accountable for their level of interaction with the communities and for the engagement of the students in university governance. She argued in favour of the institutionalization of student representation in the national legislation of countries, and used the example of her country, Jamaica, where the matter has been institutionalized.

In conclusion, this World Café session not only celebrated the achievements of the winners of the essay competition but also provided a platform for reflections on the transformative potential of universities towards society and the central role students play in this, as catalysts for positive societal transformation. One of the important takeaways from this discussion is the importance of the collaboration between universities and the students to strengthen education and to promote social change. Moreover, the discussion highlighted the importance of the institutionalization of the participation of students in student governance bodies and the creation of mechanisms for accountability. Finally, there was a call for MCO to evaluate the application of MCU principles at the signatory universities and to extend the promotion of the Magna Charta beyond current regions, contributing to a global understanding and broader commitment to its principles.