

Magna Charta Observatory

2023 Annual report of the Secretary General

It is my pleasure to present a review of what your Observatory has achieved in 2023. Also, as we approach a review of our strategy, I will share a reflection of the journey we have travelled over the last 10 years and invite your input as we start work on charting our course for the period 2025 -30.

The contexts in which work continue to develop in different directions. While the Academic Freedom Index reports marked improvements in a few countries, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan being prominent this year, it found Academic freedom to be in retreat for over 50% of the world's population – a very challenging situation. The circumstances faced by universities in countries such as Hungary and Turkey continue to be worrying. We see issues causing concern in other countries and in 2024 we will attempt to focus on those in the USA when our Anniversary take place in Washington.

Although we do not know the full extent of it, information which has been received suggests that signatory universities have been most generous with their support for universities in Ukraine following the extremely challenging situation which they have faced since the Russian invasion in February 2022. We are pleased to welcome representatives of those universities to Lodz. I should also like to recognise the very warm welcome and generous support which has been received from our hosts, the University of Lodz, which has made it possible to hold the 2023 Anniversary in Poland.

In the last year we have added translations of MCU 2020 into Ukrainian, Polish, and Catalan that have kindly been prepared by colleagues in signatory universities. We know that others are currently being prepared. We are also in the process of arranging translations of the Living Values guidelines. Those who help us with this work are helping to make the values which are precious to us all and, the means of giving them full effect, available to many people across the globe and we are very grateful to them.

A significant innovation this year is that the MCO organised its first essay competition for students. This attracted 97 entries from 24 countries. The essay question was 'How might students exercise more influence in enabling their universities to make a more effective contribution to society?' The competition was organised in collaboration with the Global Student Forum (GSF) and the European Students' Union (ESU). It was judged by a globally diverse balanced panel of students and staff and men and women. We welcome the five winners to Lodz where they will read and discuss their entries on 24 October in a live-streamed session. The winners and the judges will be recognised in the signing ceremony on 25 October. The competition also generated correspondence from students undertaking research in our field whom we hope will be helped by engagement with the MCO. I hope to be able to announce a very exciting development of the competition for 2024 quite soon.

Also, regarding students, the MCO has for some years worked with student organisations, nominees of two of which (GSF and ESU) are in membership of the MCO Council. At the signing ceremony on 25 October we will be taking this to a higher and more secure level when an MoU is signed with GSF to support future joint projects.

During the year the MCO launched its research project. The theme selected, to align with the emphasis in MCU 2020, was "The Responsive and Responsible University". Proposals were invited from signatory universities to engage in collaborative projects with the MCO. Nineteen proposals were received. After a criteria-based grading process eight were selected and we are pleased that representatives from six of the projects are with us in Lodz, following the first research workshop. The project is part of our strategic objective to make the MCO the "go to" place for information on values, autonomy and academic freedom. (A more detailed report on our research work will follow this report.)

Our MCO Ambassadors are now engaged in supporting research projects as well as universities undertaking the Living Values project. We are grateful to them for all that they add to the MCO's capacity to assist signatory universities. Ambassadors are currently working with us to prepare resources which can be used in leadership development programme for student and university leaders, about which more will be said in the World Café session on 24 October.

We have also continued to organised webinars and to collaborate with kindred global and regional bodies including IAU, EUA, Scholars at Risk, the Association of Arab Universities, the Global Consortium and student bodies GSF and ESU. The number of signatories, including those who will sign on 25 October, has risen to 975. More universities are engaging with the Living Values project and we welcome reports on their experience which we can publish to assist other signatories. We welcomed invitations to participate in relevant global or regional symposia including EPOKA University, Albania, who featured the MCO in its International conference on challenges in the Western Balkans: infrastructure and developments in the region. The AArU General Assembly, Tunisia enabled the MCO to address some 300 rectors, on the theme of student engagement and the AArU will be collaborating with us at the IAU international conference in Qatar.

Development of the MCO's strategy

Over the previous 10 years, the Magna Charta Observatory has advanced from a primary focus on promoting the MCU document, developing advocacy and underlining the aspirational role of the document, to focussing 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. Nearly 1000 universities from 94 countries have now signed the first, second or both MCUs – thereby creating a large and diverse multi-cultural international group.

The strategy adopted by the Council for the period 2020 – 2025 is progressing well as the activities above hopefully demonstrate. Between now and the end of 2024 it will be a priority for the MCO Council to prepare a strategy that will take us to 2030 and beyond and address the question of how the MCO can best help universities in 2030. To inform that strategy we invite your input. I will write out about it. Just as universities played a key role in revising the MCU, we hope that their input will result in a strategy that truly serves universities globally.

The Council will then have to determine how the strategy is to be funded. The MCO is grateful to the University of Bologna for the financial and other help which it has provided. It is also grateful to those universities which made voluntary donations to support its work. In 2022 and this year we have needed to draw on our reserves to deliver our programme and the same will be true to deliver next year's programme. I hope therefore that you will be as generous as you can be when we write to seek your help financially. We are currently one of the few associations that does not charge a joining or a membership subscription and it is our wish to maintain this position, so that all can benefit, irrespective of their means. We would welcome conversation with universities that would like to become more involved in the work of the Observatory and who would like to host one of our conferences.

Internally we were pleased to welcome the appointment of Julia Berruezo as our research assistant who, in addition to her research role, has added significant additional capacity and additional skills to our staff team of Carla Pazzaglia, whom we thank warmly, and me.

We thank the members of the Governing Council and its committees for all that they do for the Observatory in an entirely voluntary capacity. It is however the support, engagement and action of the signatory universities which is most essential and cherished. Thank you for all that you have done to enable the Observatory to progress to this stage and thank you, in anticipation, for your input to our future strategy and for all that we hope you will do to realise our aim to enable universities to play an even greater role in society in these turbulent times and in the future.

David J. Lock
Secretary General

Delivered in the University of Lodz,
Poland
23 October 2023