

From: President Magna Charta Observatory
 To: Council and Review Group
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Towards a new MCU – a first exploration and roadmap

1. The present MCU: its Message and its Setting

1.1. In 1988 at the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna hundreds of rectors signed the *Magna Charta Universitatum*. Against the backdrop of centuries of European Universities and in view of the growing co-operation between European nations and the role of universities in an increasingly international society they wanted to demonstrate the core principles of what a university is and should be.

1.2. It strikes today's readers of this text that it uses stately language to convey rather up-to-date ideas and convictions. 'The future of mankind,' it says, 'depends on cultural, scientific and technical development,' of which universities are key drivers, as centres of culture, knowledge and research to serve society. This is to be done by teaching younger generations but it also requires a broader service to society. In the interest of the cultural, social and economic future of society a considerable investment in continuing education should be made. As a main feature of education and training it is stated that universities must teach respect for 'the great harmonies of their natural environment and of life itself'.

From this it is immediately clear that the MCU presents a future-oriented outlook, in the interest of a broad development of societies along with the promotion of due respect for the natural environment.

1.3. To enable universities to play their part the declaration goes on to proclaim four fundamental *principles* on which the mission of universities should be based.

1.3.1. The *first* of these is about *independence*: 'To meet the needs of the world around [the university], its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.'

Immediately preceding this statement the university is being described as an *autonomous* cultural institution in the heart of societies that for reasons of historical tradition and geography are organized in different ways.

The very wording of this first principle ('morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power') and the way it is wrapped in a statement of purpose ('to meet the needs of the world around it') as well as a description of international diversity ('societies differently organised because of geography and historical heritage') are signs of considerable wisdom on the part of the drafters. They refrained from making unilateral complacent statements on the university, but rather made it crystal clear that universities are *embedded* institutions. They are not self-serving entities, but exist in a social setting, to the benefit of their particular environment. The university must be independent for a purpose, in order to enable it to do what it is supposed to be doing and in order to best serve those whom it is supposed to be serving.

1.3.2. The *second* principle (*teaching and research should be inseparable*) is also directly linked to the need to constantly respond to the changing needs and demands of society as well as to stay in touch with scientific knowledge advances. It is important to note that this principle is not in any way linked to a specific institutional profile (be it research-intensive or teaching-focused) but stated as a crucial prerequisite for good quality relevant education. Teaching is to be constantly up-dated. Delivery off the shelves will not do.

1.3.3. University life as the workplace of research and the meeting-ground of teachers and students is to be governed by *freedom, openness to dialogue and rejection of intolerance*. Protecting this *third* fundamental principle is seen as a responsibility for governments and universities alike.

1.3.4. In formulating a *fourth* principle the MCU clearly betrays its European birthplace. It presents itself as a declaration of European university rectors and calls for *heeding the European humanist tradition*. At the same time universal knowledge must be sought, frontiers should be crossed and cultural differences taken into account.

2. Some key trends since 1988

2.1. Since 1988 university provisions have increased considerably *in volume and variety, in outreach as well as in weight*. More institutions, public as well as private; many more students, staff and programmes; new digital delivery modes and research facilities; intensified interests from a growing number of stakeholders; a lot more international traffic for study purposes and a much

stronger globally visible research output. Grand challenges in terms of scientific ambitions as well as in terms of future planet sustainability do underscore the key role of scientific discovery and innovation. As was to be expected in a field with a greater number of strong players competition and competitiveness have increased, in funding, for high reputation ranks as well as for talents. At the same time high levels of political and societal turbulence and/or dynamics constantly shape and re-shape the social contracts on which universities depend.

It is of course impossible to do justice to three decades of university developments in just this one paragraph. This very succinct description does, however, clearly show that it hasn't been business as usual. And although individual developments haven't happened with the same intensity in each and every nation or region, the overall picture is one of *greater complexity, wider reach* and *more variety*. When applied to the Magna Charta Universitatum and its origins in Europe of the 1980s these changes certainly do suggest the need for adapting the description of the role and function of universities as well as rethinking the core principles of what a university should be, or rather what universities would declare their core principles to be.

2.2. In addition to these considerations of context change a critical analysis of the 1988 statement might buttress the need for rethinking. Underlining the importance of autonomy and social responsibility, freedom and tolerance, the nexus of teaching and research certainly was a crucial message to the outside world in Europe of the 1980s. Yet at the same time important aspect of university life and performance remained outside the picture. Since then *quality, trust* and *reliability* have become important issues for universities, and with them values like integrity, fairness and accountability. All three of them mainly refer to central principles of basic quality of university performance in teaching and research as well as in governance, management and internal organization.

2.3. *In conclusion* it seems there is good reason to not only rethink the 1988 statement because of many changes in the university landscape worldwide and of important developments in the contexts of universities, but also because the 1988 statement did not – at least not explicitly - include considerations of internal quality and reliability.

3. A new edition of the MCU: by whom and to which purpose?

3.1. The MCU was not the first or the only declaration on university values. Since 1988 the list has been growing further as many felt the need to issue public

statements on university values, both institutions themselves as well as national or international organizations.

Codes of Ethics and mission statements on university values have gained considerable prominence over the years. Why is this? At least *four* factors are at play. Continuous *change* and complexity challenges require constant re-steer: where to go and why. In many countries public opinion demonstrates and supports a revived interest in *moral* issues. At a global scale as well as at home a stark *diversity* of cultures and heritages implies a variety of norms that require a clear positioning on the part of education and research providers. An immensely grown *research output* and enormous *data-collections* have created a need for internationally visible standards and normative procedures in the interest of reliability and trust.

In parallel to statements by Higher Education providers themselves a fair number of national and international bodies have issued declarations on core values in Higher Education. Some of them are quite broad statements others focus on specific aspects, like the role of teachers or the quality of research work. Some are addressing a wide audience others speak to the university community itself.

3.2. Given this background a first question comes up about the ownership of the new MCU: *by whom would a new MCU be presented?*

Wouldn't it be sensible to see it in the first place as an *update* for present and past supporters and signatories of the 1988 MCU? In line with the 1988 statement it would then be the voice of today's worldwide universities speaking to the issues and challenges of today and the years to come, committing themselves to live by the stated principles and ambitions, and inviting others (stakeholders, partners, governments) to enable universities to operate according to these principles and ambitions, and protect them whenever needed.

It would be reasonable that past and present signatories be invited to explicitly re-commit by subscribing to the new version. Which would clearly be seen as a strong demonstration in support of the principles and values expressed by the new statement.

At the same time it is to be expected that such a modernization of MCU would attract new supporters and signatories.

3.3. These considerations already offer a set of answers to a second question. *To which purpose* would one issue a new edition? Well, to update and modernize the MCU so that it speaks to the issues and challenges of today and tomorrow, to demonstrate the commitment of past and present signatories, and to attract new supporters to further broaden the scope of the MCU.

This notion of purpose immediately leads to a discussion of *address* and *audience*. In so far as the 1988 MCU only implicitly addresses universities and academic communities themselves it would make sense to be more explicit this time and introduce self-commitment as a clear-cut theme. At the same time the new declaration should explicitly address stakeholders, wherever relevant. Identifying key stakeholders (government, funders, private owners and beyond) will no doubt enhance the external effects of the declaration.

3.4. If these suggestions about *ownership* and *purpose* were supported, the next task would be to demarcate its contents. Here three aspects seem to be relevant.

3.4.1. *First* one could reflect to which extent the new MCU should repeat the 1988 version. Quoting portions of the original statement would demonstrate a clear continuity, not just for continuity's sake but because major elements of the earlier statement are still as valid today as they were back in 1988.

3.4.2. *Then* it would be valuable to make an inventory of significant declarations that have been issued in the decades since 1988. An analysis of these texts will probably help to identify what in various contexts has been deemed important by individual universities and (inter)national associations. This exercise is not an *in vitro* operation.

3.4.3. A *third* approach could be to explicitly link up with the Living Values tools the Magna Charta Observatory is about to launch. Ideally the new MCU would speak in the same way about values and practising them, so both projects (the new declaration and the Living Values tools) would reinforce each other.

3.5. Once these preparatory steps have been set a first *draft* of the new MCU should be attempted. This is the primary responsibility of the Review Group. They are invited to present such a draft to Council by March 2019, and at the same time suggest a further *roadmap* for testing and try-outs in the course of 2019. The Bologna conference of June 2019 offers a first-rate opportunity for this. As the launch of a new MCU is foreseen for September 2020 the work of redrafting should be finished before March 2020.