

A New Magna Charta Universitatum

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Since 1988, almost 1,000 universities have signed the Magna Charta Universitatum. With this statement of fundamental principles, they have expressed the crucial value of academic independence and freedom. Initiated by the council of European rectors as a foundation for international collaboration and collegial support, the statement has gained worldwide prominence.

The world has since 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 in scope and mission. The potential of higher education and research to be a positive agent of change and social transformation endures. The principles laid out in the 1988 Magna Charta are as valid today as they were back then. They remain the necessary precondition for human advancement through enquiry, analysis, and sound action.

At the same time, the great successes of universities have attracted interventions of all sorts. In many places, political as well as economic powers wish to make sure that their interests are being served in ways not always respecting university autonomy or academic freedom of individual scholars and students. These challenges require the global academy to stand up for its essential values as well as clearly identify the responsibilities and commitments that are vital to universities around the world in the twenty-first century.

Against the backdrop of these challenges, we felt that we needed a fresh expression of core values and principles, as well as responsibilities. This is what the new Magna Charta Universitatum (drafted in 2019, defined in 2020, and formally launched in June 2021) aims to be.

The Value of Values

Values are important beliefs or ideals shared by members of a community about what is good or bad, desirable or not. They serve as broad guidelines for a person's or a community's behavior and attitude. Why do they matter for universities? Values steer institutional profile-setting and help define what kind of institution we want to be. They demonstrate which interests we want to serve and why we do so. At the same time, values are quality markers, like integrity in research operations and fairness in the educational process. In addition, values matter because they are foundational principles of institutional self-understanding and positioning in society, like autonomy and academic freedom, social responsibility, and equity. Another significant use of values is that they guide

Abstract

Identifying, discussing, and sharing core values is important to any university. Since 1988, the Magna Charta Universitatum has served as a public statement of the fundamental principles of autonomous universities. A fresh expression of core values, principles, and responsibilities was needed in view of worldwide successes as well as challenges: This is the underlying idea of the new statement launched in June 2021.

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academic communities in (inter)national relations, regarding with whom to collaborate, in which ways, and for what purpose, and how to cope with cultural diversity, including different value priorities.

So, identifying, discussing, and sharing core values is important to any university, particularly in view of political turbulence, competing claims, and internal differences of convictions and opinions. Ideally, values enable a university to enhance its performance in teaching, learning, and research. If such values are identified and expressed as truly shared values, they strengthen a university's sense of community. In addition, the expression of lived values helps to demonstrate to the outside world why a university makes certain decisions and which values it hopes to instill in its graduates.

The New Magna Charta

Since the first Magna Charta, a crucial aspect has been that key values like independence and academic freedom were meant not to serve as selfish privileges, but rather as foundations for responsible universities that wish to serve their communities by contributing to the well-being and development of our societies. This is why the new statement begins by declaring that “universities acknowledge that they have a responsibility to engage with and respond to the aspirations and challenges of the world and to the communities they serve, to benefit humanity and contribute to sustainability.” And further, that “intellectual and moral autonomy is the hallmark of any university and a precondition for the fulfillment of its responsibilities to society. That independence needs to be recognized and protected by governments and society at large, and defended vigorously by institutions themselves.”

This affirmation implies that a reliable social contract with civil society, which fully respects institutional autonomy, is a crucial precondition for high quality academic work as well as valuable service to present and future societies. In addition to this reliable foundational relationship with government and society, the new statement asserts that universities are part of a global collegial network of scholarship and are committed to addressing global challenges, while at the same time deeply engaging with their local communities and ecosystems.

On these issues, the new statement is both more explicit and more comprehensive. Similarly, relative to the 1988 commitment to university life as a meeting ground for teachers and students to be governed by freedom, openness to dialogue, and rejection of intolerance, the new declaration is more inclusive. “Universities are non-discriminatory spaces of tolerance and respect where diversity of perspectives flourishes and where inclusivity, anchored in principles of equity and fairness, prevails. They therefore commit themselves to advance equity and fairness in all aspects of academic life including admissions, hiring and promotion practices.”

In the present setting, it is not possible to present or discuss all elements of the new statement. (For easy reference, it is available at the magna-charta.org website.) Neither does the new statement contain a complete set of all relevant issues. Like the 1988 declaration, it highlights what the drafters found crucial. Yet, in this case, the drafting was done by a diverse, global team, and the round of consultations that followed was also a worldwide process. As a result, the statement reflects a series of key challenges and priorities that span the globe.

Strengthening the Role of Universities

The underlying idea of the new statement is to make the voice of universities heard loud and clear, as a strong collegial and supportive signal to our sister institutions around the globe. Ultimately, by signing the Magna Charta 2020, universities declare their commitment to strengthening their role in the preservation of the planet and in promoting health, prosperity, and enlightenment around the world. No university can achieve that much all by itself. Only through collaboration based on shared engagement do these ultimate goals come within reach. That is exactly why launching the new statement is an invitation to colleagues to review the extent to which they live in accordance with the principles and values, and fulfil the responsibilities set out in it. By joining the community of signatories, colleagues will help both themselves and other institutions to strengthen their position and influence in society for the good of all. ▲

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