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*President Observatory  
Magna Charta Universitatum*

Mr President, Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Rector, Dear Colleagues!

It is a great honour as well as a pleasure to have been invited to speak at this festive occasion at this great university!

I am afraid, however, that I should begin with two apologies.

First of all, I sincerely regret that I am unable to speak to you in Italian today. It certainly is one of the many benefits we proudly share across Europe: the talent of speaking each other's languages. It is one of those many bridges that over the centuries have been connecting our nations and our literatures. Speaking for myself I have from my students days onwards been an avid reader of two of your great authors: Alessandro Manzoni and Italo Calvino. Although very different, the two of them have stolen my reader's heart long ago.

Yet my ability to speak your beautiful language is too limited for an occasion like this. So I shall recur to today's academic *lingua franca*, international English.

My second apology is about the content of my talk. I have no new scientific discovery to report or any deep new insight to share. As a matter of fact I shall be saying nothing new at all. Just a serious reminder of what we all know and have known for a long time already.

I shall be speaking about University Values and their meaning for a Sustainable Europe.

For many years – I was having various leadership responsibilities at Dutch Universities at the time – for many years I have taken these values and their value for Europe for granted. I suffered from what the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche once meant when he said that it is more difficult to find the truth in dull times than it is in difficult times. When we do not realize what is at stake, when we even take fundamental values for granted.

We apparently need a wake up call, a realization that we should pay serious attention to what we thought to be self-evident. Like today!

So nothing new on my part, just a new occasion to draw our attention to an already well-known set of values and fundamentals and an invitation to rethink their meaning and application to our present condition.

Last year I was invited to speak at a somewhat similar occasion, at another European university. There the prime minister of the country was one of the speakers before me. He called upon the students of today to be brave, to courageously stand up for family values and national traditions. Instead of – he went on to say – these “misleading” European values and traditions.

Although his country is a member state of the European Union, this in his view apparently has no real bearing on shared values and traditions.

Being in the EU is to him and his government little more than an arrangement for receiving generous subsidies and having borderless trade relations.

Because of my lower status in the rankings of state diplomacy I was fortunate enough to be speaking after him. Which allowed me to friendly remind the audience - including the students the prime minister had been calling upon – that it is entirely possible to love your family and be proud of your nation, your region and your traditions, and at the same time be a convinced European, be illuminated by the light of the European culture and be strongly connected to European neighbours and partners.

As quite a few philosophers and social scientists have told us, it is a great mistake to think that our iden-

tities are simple, a monopoly of one trait or one token.

All of us, we are a mosaic of diverse pieces of identity. As a whole they represent who we are and as pieces they are ever so many connections with our fellow citizens, our fellow humans on this planet. This is what we discover when we grow up, when we travel, when we listen to music, watch movies and read books from all over the place, when we team up with international partners, when we get to better know ourselves.

University Values are of three kinds.

Some are literally fundamental, they are enabling universities to be what they are supposed to be. Most important of these are autonomy and academic freedom.

Other university values are about the operational functioning of a university, the quality of our work. Among these are integrity and fairness.

A third set of values I call social values. They are about the responsiveness of the university to society and the social quality of our decisions on access, on the priorities of our research and the equity of our outreach.

No worry. I am not going to do a comprehensive lecture on all these values, what they entail and how we usually struggle to live by them.

I'll rather highlight three aspects or cases that in my view are of particular relevance, both to Europe and the sustainability of its shared future, and to today's and tomorrow's universities.

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My first highlight is about academic freedom. I need only mention three countries and you'll immediately guess what is at stake here: Turkey, USA, China. Within only a period of five years Turkey's universities have become muzzled communities of fear and censorship where before they were beacons of development and modernity.

In the US it is above all head-on collisions of freedoms that paralyze higher education: one group requiring they be spared the free opinions of the other side and vice versa.

Trigger warnings and micro-aggression have become a household phenomenon in many institutions. Several states even allow students to bring guns to the classroom for self-protection. Meanwhile in China massive surveillance of literally everything that is going on in universities leads to high degrees of self-censorship and a continuous threat of repression on the part of government and party officials.

How are we doing in Europe?

Thirty years ago hundreds of university rectors signed in 1988 at the 9th centennial of the University of Bologna the Magna Charta Universitatum. In that statement it reads:

*"Freedom in research and teaching is the fundamental principle of university life, and government 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 students entitled, able and willing to enrich their minds with that knowledge."*

This English translation of one of the central statements of The Magna Charta Universitatum states and reflects a strong academic tradition of freedom and dialogue. At the same time it clearly *qualifies* the beneficiaries of this freedom and dialogue: it speaks of *capable* and *well-equipped* teachers and of stu-

dents who are *entitled, able and willing to enrich their minds*.

In other words: a university is an ideal meeting-ground for the qualified and the willing. It is an open platform but in a functional way: directed towards knowledge and development. It is an open platform but in a professional setting: amidst accomplished knowledge workers and those that want to be exactly this.

*Academic freedom* must be defended, it certainly must be practiced, but in order to get it right, we should be absolutely clear about what we mean by it and what this meaning implies.

These days many US campuses, and all Turkish and Chinese universities demonstrate what happens if the university loses her freedom to be what qualifies her most: an open meeting-ground and a platform of free inquiry and free teaching and learning.

For European universities the examples I mention are no less than wake-up calls, clear and strong signals to heed. They are, however, more than a warning for governments, they are of concern to the academy just as well.

In my own years as a university president I have often experienced how strong our inclination towards the like-minded is. Inviting colleagues with very different approaches or protesting students often led to protest and reproach. "Why would you want to offer her / him a platform?" Our inclination towards the mainstream and the usual is very strong indeed. We all easily tend and bend towards the comfort of the well known and the supportive, just as easily as we move away from the strange and the challenging. Yet, if we as universities are unable to embrace diversity and open ourselves to variant views and traditions, we certainly are failing our calling.

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This brings me to a *second* aspect that I would like to highlight today.

We all agree that universities are to serve society. It is our *raison d'être*. Preparing new generations for professional roles in society, contributing to the development of culture and civilization, as well as supporting innovations in the work place, in technologies or in energy production and use – these are all major responsibilities for the academy.

We have truly internalized this truth: we know that our end users are companies and communities, schools and start-ups, hospitals as well as hydrogen plants. We are so used to this truth that we think all we do is done well, seen from the perspective of society.

However, here as everywhere convenient truths may be blocking our view.

Two years ago we were in Berlin, in a meeting of mainly German and UK academic leadership. Our conversations were about one topic and one topic alone: the Brexit vote of the week before. All of us were surprised by the results and worried about the impact.

Yet our British colleagues were quick to state that the real surprise for them had been the realization that they had been reading their electorate completely wrong. The evident logic of EU benefits to their universities and their research funding had been blocking their view of others, many of their fellow citizens in other communities, with other priorities.

This example is easily multiplied. Applied to my topic (the contribution of university to society) it demonstrates that all of us have our society of preference, the kind of society or the part of society we work for and are familiar with. Particularly in our very fragmented societies it is very easy to be picky about the kind of society we are working for.

Yet our commitment to equity, to do justice to all, should prevent us to be picky, should not allow us to

line up with those players and those institutions in society that seem to be our natural allies or our best paying partners rather than with those that would benefit from our support most.

Universities in many countries are seen as elite institutions, not because of their high quality output, but rather because of their being part of the establishment and serving the interests of that same establishment.

Whether this reproach is entirely correct or not (in many cases it is too simple I think), it certainly points to an important issue.

If we are to serve society, we should ask ourselves: serving society, which society? We should wonder whether it is society that pays best or has most visibility that should be the society we are to serve as well.

Today's societies are in many cases very fragmented, a mosaic of various groups with various interests rather than representing a common public good.

In the American presidential campaign of 2016 white Texan voters expressly voted against public education. "Why would I pay my tax dollars to educate them Hispanics?"

I know no clearer illustration that you do not get very far these days with a public good argument. Texas is everywhere.

We all are well aware these days that our societies are marked by diversity. A diverse line up of groups and communities is striving to get what they want. We all are in search of respect and recognition. And these days new media make it all too easy to have yourselves be heard and seen.

Universities have a long and strong tradition to contribute to the public good.

The challenge of today is to translate that contribution into a new kind of responsiveness that will be widely understood and trusted by our diverse society. For many years we have thought that low threshold entrance to higher education and fair access to the benefits of our research will do. Today's condition requires a serious rethinking.

Does higher education indeed offer equal opportunities to all? Does our research indeed benefit society at large, diverse as it is?

These questions we should be seriously discuss in our universities. Best practices should be looked for. Easy answers are no option.

The format of my present talk doesn't allow me to go into detail. The nature of the questions at stake doesn't allow a visitor from abroad to provide the answers. This is a challenge that confronts each and every university in its own setting. The Magna Charta Observatory has recently launched the Living Values Project. It is – simply stated – an invitation to universities in our worldwide community to engage in internal debate to reassess our joint value base and re-evaluate whether we have our priorities right as to how we are serving our fragmented societies best.

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Which brings me to my *third* and final point.

My tenure in university leadership positions from the late seventies of the last century well into the new millennium has allowed me to observe long waves of change in the global world of higher education and research. It is truly amazing to note how much has been achieved, in terms of reach and impact as well as in terms of quality and scale. From solemn towers for the happy few universities have become halls

for the many. From very national institutions they have become crossroads of international collaborations. Just look at the development of the Bologna Process into the European Higher Education Area of 48 countries between Iceland and Armenia, Kazakhstan and Portugal. And imagine a Europe without the many present joint research endeavours it generously supports in many different ways.

Yet also the most welcome of developments reach a point where one cannot just continue along the same lines. Old universities have not become old by simply sticking to what they once were, but by reinventing themselves, identifying the new challenges and providing new responses.

Of all the issues that warrant rethinking I mention only one. It is our long and very successful tradition of disciplinary teaching & learning and research. This tradition has brought us great successes, no doubt about that. Yet there are many good reasons for serious rethinking.

Not only the observation that new insights in science very often are found in the no man's land between disciplines or on the squares where disciplines meet. Not only the observation that in many professions young graduates are expected to work in multidisciplinary teams and have the skills to successfully do so.

Above all the observation that many of the key challenges human life on this planet is facing do require multilateral thinking, complexity studies and interdisciplinary skills.

The Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988 correctly stresses our responsibility for the future of our societies. It uses lofty language to emphasize our responsibility for our ecosystem. '*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.

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. At that time the far-reaching and structural consequences of such a future-oriented outlook were not yet seen. This is exactly why right now we at Magna Charta Observatory have begun work on a new version of the 1988 statement.

It is too early to say what it will be like.

But I would not be surprised if it would not among other features voice our strong aspiration to reorganize our teaching & learning and doing research across mono-disciplinary boundaries and into new configurations of study and research. For exactly the same good reasons the original Magna Charta mentioned: in the interest of the *future of mankind* and the *great harmonies of natural environment and life itself*.

I know what you are thinking right now: what lofty statements, solemn declarations.

You're right. These are just aspirational words and concepts of purpose.

Yet observing what is going on in quite a few places already and listening to colleagues who have already engaged in complexity studies and interdisciplinary work, I have no doubt that we should adapt our traditional structures and programs accordingly.

If the university is to be true to its calling to serve future generations well, it should not shy away from adapting its structures and programs to this end. Whether the issue is social cohesion or the lack thereof, sustainable economies and how to get there, renewable energy and its price, the ethics of the digital

age, sustainable food & nutrition, healthy aging – in all these cases we cannot make progress unless we collaborate, unless we make crossovers, unless we dare to be different.

Last year the first cohort of students in the new undergraduate program *Future Planet Studies* at my Amsterdam University were evaluating their experience. A large majority liked what they had learned, they would do it again and would recommend their peers to do the same. Their most important criticism, however, was about their teachers. Not about their academic quality or their teaching skills, no, precisely because of their lack of interdisciplinary experience and attitude. The program is interdisciplinary all right, they said. And we have learned to be exactly that. Yet our teachers are lagging behind.

I know no better testimony to illustrate what I said before. For universities to successfully engage in working towards today's great challenges we – teachers and researchers – must be committed to rethink and retrain ourselves. From those who have done so I have learned that this is no pious wish. It can be done and it can be done well.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I was asked to contribute to today's festive occasion as representative of the Magna Charta community. It was my pleasure to do so.

Universities are – like the 1988 declaration stated – in the centre of European civilization, for centuries already and with considerable successes.

These successes are needed in the future just as well. They will, however, only come about with our full engagement.

The very short summary of my speech is the invitation to all of you to recommit yourselves to do just that.

Thank you very much for your attention.