Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1762 (2006)[1]

Academic freedom and university autonomy

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe recalls the Magna Charta Universitatum opened for signature by universities in 1988 on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the University of Bologna (Italy), which has since been signed by some 600 universities from all continents with new signatories every year.

2. The Magna Charta Universitatum reflects the vital role universities played in the development of the European humanist tradition and in the development of civilisations. It also reiterates that the fundamental principles and rights of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are essential for universities, and that continued observation of those values is for the benefit of individual societies and humanity in general.

3. In 2000, the University of Bologna and the Association of European Universities, as depositories of the Magna Charta Universitatum, founded the Observatory of Fundamental University Values and Rights, to which the Council of Europe has delegated a representative. The task of the Observatory is to monitor the observation of the principles and initiate an open debate on the values these principles represent.

4. In accordance with the Magna Charta Universitatum, the Assembly reaffirms the right to academic freedom and university autonomy which comprises the following principles:

4.1. academic freedom in research and in training should guarantee freedom of expression and of action, freedom to disseminate information and freedom to conduct research and distribute knowledge and truth without restriction;

4.2. the institutional autonomy of universities should be a manifestation of an independent commitment to the traditional and still essential cultural and social mission of the university, in terms of intellectually beneficial policy, good governance and efficient management;

4.3. history has proven that violations of academic freedom and university autonomy have always resulted in intellectual relapse, and consequently in social and economic stagnation;

4.4. high costs and losses, however, could also ensue if universities moved towards the isolation of an "ivory tower" and did not react to the changing needs of societies that they should serve and help educate and develop; universities need to be close enough to society to be able to contribute to solving fundamental problems, yet sufficiently detached to maintain a critical distance and to take a longer-term view.

5. In the course of history, universities have been confronted with profound changes and challenges arising from transformations of societies and the institutions themselves. They have mostly proved capable of simultaneously answering necessary external and internal demands to meet their historic role of the pursuit of free and universal knowledge.

6. With the advent of the knowledge society, it has become obvious that a new contract has to be reached between university and society to reflect and recognise new developments. In such an understanding, the social and cultural responsibility and accountability of universities to the public and to their mission are to be considered as the unavoidable other side of academic liberties.

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1. Assembly debate on 30 June 2006 (23rd Sitting) (see Doc. 10943Doc. 10943, report of the Committee on Culture, Science and Education, rapporteur: Mr Jařab). Text adopted by the Assembly on 30 June 2006 (23rd Sitting).

7. It may be true that the academic freedom of researchers, scholars and teachers and the institutional autonomy of universities need to be readjusted to meet contemporary conditions, but these principles should also be reaffirmed and guaranteed by law, preferably in the constitution. As testified by frequent assessments and evaluations carried out internationally, the academic mission to meet the requirements and needs of the modern world and contemporary societies can be best performed when universities are morally and intellectually independent of all political or religious authority and economic power.

8. The social and cultural responsibility of universities means more than mere responsiveness to immediate demands of societies and the needs of the market, however important it may be to take these demands and needs seriously into account. It calls for a partnership in the definition of knowledge for society and implies that universities should continue to take a longer-term view and contribute to solving the fundamental issues of society as well as to finding remedies to immediate problems.

9. The traditional vocation and full potential of universities for the 21st century include, besides independent inquiry and free advancement of acquired knowledge (but also through these activities), steady contributions to developing social order and a sense of basic values in societies, cultivation of national identity as well as an open-minded understanding of international and universal merits, promotion of democratic citizenship and sensitivity to human and natural environment both locally and globally, setting of academic objectives, training for practical flexibility and teaching in critical thinking.

10. To grant universities academic freedom and autonomy is a matter of trust in the specificity and uniqueness of the institution, which has been reconfirmed throughout history. These principles, however, should remain a subject of a continued and open dialogue between the academic world and society at large in the spirit of partnership. Universities should be expected to live up to certain societal and political objectives, even to comply with certain demands of the market and the business world, but they should also be entitled to decide on which means to choose in the pursuit and fulfilment of their short-term and long-term missions in society.

11. Accountability, transparency and quality assurance are preconditions for granting universities academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Only under such a contract between society and universities can it be expected that universities will serve the societies well and will, through freedom of choice of how to do it best, be proactive, meaning that they will not just respond to changes but will be leading agents in initiating and accomplishing desirable developments.

12. Through the Parliamentary Assembly and its relevant committees as well as through the Committee of Ministers and the activities of its intergovernmental Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research, the Council of Europe should act to the effect of reaffirming the vital importance of academic freedom and university autonomy and contribute to an open political dialogue on the understanding of these concepts in the complex and changing reality of our modern societies. Goals and criteria must be realistic and well defined, which is often lacking in the emerging “audit society”.

13. The Assembly resolves to co-operate with the Observatory of the Magna Charta Universitatum in monitoring the observance of the principles of academic freedom and university autonomy in Europe, thus adding a European parliamentary dimension to the work of the observatory.

14. The Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers strengthen its work on academic freedom and university autonomy as a fundamental requirement of any democratic society. It invites the Committee of Ministers to require recognition of academic freedom and university autonomy as a condition for membership of the Council of Europe. In this respect, the Assembly calls on the Committee of Ministers, specialised ministries of member governments in charge and universities in member states to set up a multilateral programme for European student and faculty exchanges with universities in Belarus and the Belarusian “European Humanities University” in Vilnius (Lithuania).