

The logo for the Magna Charta Observatory features a decorative border at the top. On the left, the text 'OBSERVATORY' is written in a red, serif font, with 'MAGNA CHARTA UNIVERSITATUM' in a smaller, grey, serif font below it. To the right, there is a colorful, stylized illustration of the Magna Charta document, showing the words 'Magna Charta' in large, ornate letters with various colors like green, yellow, and red, surrounded by intricate floral and scrollwork patterns.

OBSERVATORY

MAGNA CHARTA UNIVERSITATUM

# ***Autonomy: a privilege for a purpose***

Sijbolt Noorda

President, Magna Charta Observatory

CIQC Washington DC February 1, 2018



# Magna Charta Universitatum

- in Bologna in 1988 many European universities signed the Magna Charta Universitatum
- since then many more have done so, up to 816 worldwide
- convinced of the importance for academia of *autonomy, academic freedom* and other essential principles like *integrity* and *equity*
- they did this as a demonstration to stakeholders and as a token of their own commitment to live up to these fundamental principles



common and continuous  
efforts wanted

- Magna Charta Observatory tries to find ways to promote serious thinking, talking, working on core *principles* in Higher Education and Research

[www.magna-charta.org](http://www.magna-charta.org)

- we do not have the ready answer to all questions and challenges
- *but invite universities and stakeholders to actively develop and support core principles*



## Magna Charta Universitatum (1988) on autonomy

‘ The university is an *autonomous* institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be *morally and intellectually independent* of all political authority and economic power.’

simple and straightforward

- this all may sound rather simple and straightforward
- yet in reality it isn't that easy, at least on two accounts

*1 autonomy must be granted*

*1 it is the use of autonomy that counts*

making statements is not  
sufficient

- principles like *autonomy* and *academic freedom* are founding conditions of the university
- meant to *enable* good teaching & learning and research, to serve society in the best possible ways
- what does this imply in actual practice?

## ‘social contract’

- autonomy is not just a formal, legal privilege but part of a social contract:  
*autonomy must be granted*
- stakeholders (societies; governments; political, religious or ethnic groups; businesses; private owners) should realize that without it universities cannot be and deliver what they should be and deliver

## ‘social contract’

- the social setting of Higher Ed is a dynamic one, changing over time and defined by the power, interests and trust of a good number of stakeholders
- the granting of a social contract (on which autonomy depends) results from these dynamics
- so Higher Ed should fully engage in this social process, with all relevant stakeholders



## the use of autonomy

- autonomy by itself is an empty concept [an enabler, offering freedoms and opportunities]  
*it is the use of autonomy that counts*
- like by defining the mission and profile of your institution and identifying the community you want to serve
- if done right, a good use of autonomy will feed back into the social contract allowing it

- the main risk is a pleasing attitude, going with fashionable and/or powerful trends and stakeholders
- yet siding with established interests and serving high achievers isn't good enough for Higher Education
- all of this ought to be part of quality review and accreditation processes