

I should like to outline for the colleagues and the friends of Denver the reasons which 18 years ago led the most ancient European Universities, immediately followed by the leading Universities of the world, to draft, approve and sign a document during the celebrations of the ninth centenary of Bologna University: the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.

This was a spontaneous movement supported by the European Conference of Rectors and Vice Chancellors, leading to the setting up of a steering committee consisting of the Rectors of Paris Sorbonne, Pantheon, Louvain, Utrecht, Barcelona and Professor Giuseppe Caputo.

The text reflected the fundamental values of the European higher education tradition, and was intended to reinforce the links between European Universities but, due to the universal nature of its aspirations, it was immediately opened for signature to Universities from all around the world, and Universities have continued to sign it every September, year after year.

In 2001 (two thousand and one), the Magna Charta Observatory was set up in Bologna with the task of collecting information and expressing an opinion on the respect for the fundamental values and rights laid down by the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.

The activities carried out by the Observatory are to be illustrated by the Secretary General, Andris Barblan, but I should like to express some doubts and fears arising from the most significant experiences of the Observatory.

In 1999, once again in Bologna, 30 European Ministers of Higher Education, representing the EU Member States, but also a number of states that were not in the EU, signed a document known as the Bologna Declaration, in support of a European space for higher education, which made express reference to the *Magna Charta Universitatum* as its principal source of inspiration.

Our fear is that in spite of a number of declarations, the various University systems, or some of them, are tending to retreat inside their national borders, and to forget the European dimension, which dates back to medieval times, and which led us to adopt the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.

From the Bologna Declaration, freely supported and the outcome of extensive debate, there emerged a political will to operate at a European level in an awareness of the existence of a European academic space.

Today, when the conditions exist to identify common objectives and appropriate measures to achieve them, we are going through a period of stasis, if not regression.

However, if we wanted this European space, then we have a duty to govern it: as pointed out in the address by Giosuè Carducci in 1888 to celebrate the eighth centenary of Bologna University, the Universities were the essence of Europe. And indeed they still are.

The responsibility on the part of Universities for the development of society implies an analogous responsibility on the part of society for the development of the Universities: they clearly need to work in partnership.

Compared to the past, Universities today are called on to perform new functions in modern society: not only to educate the leaders and managers of tomorrow, but above all to

educate students to become active citizens in a complex society that is subject to continuous change.

In addition, the world of work requires new skills and competences: communicative skills, technological ability, proficiency in modern languages, the development of creative and critical faculties, the capacity to take responsibility for personal development. These are skills that Universities need to cultivate among their students.

European society requires an increase in knowledge for all, mass higher education, the development of training: all this calls for a slim-line structure of a non-bureaucratic kind but effective, enabling us to speak of a European space for higher education in the true sense.

In this perspective, higher education systems in the various European countries, and individual universities, that need to jealously guard their autonomy, will be able to effectively pursue common objectives and programmes, increasing relations between Universities, and promoting the free movement of young people, so they can utilise the professional skills and knowledge acquired in the Universities.

The independence and autonomy of the Universities are essential preconditions and fundamental values. It is important for their autonomy and independence to be safeguarded in the various Constitutions: otherwise Universities cannot even attempt to resist measures limiting their rights, or based on contingent policies which governments and parliaments have adopted on many occasions, often successfully.

We need links that are so strong that they enable the individual university systems to resist norms and demagogic measures such as those taken in Europe after 1968, with the indiscriminate opening up of access to higher education, the relaxation of standards in recruitment for academic posts, and

the abandonment of policies aimed at enabling young people to make choices not only on the basis of their individual vocations, but also in the interests of the collectivity.

There is an evident need for a new ‘contract’ between higher education and society, a carefully negotiated contract for the twenty-first century, responding to the demands of the contemporary world, and capable of being updated as rapidly as the changes that are taking place.

In this context research needs to be evaluated with particular reference to the results achieved in terms of the transfer to the world of technology and the economy, but higher education is also judged on the basis of the assessment of the teaching that it provides. The role of the University in awarding degrees that equip graduates to play an active role in the labour market is also of fundamental importance, once again underlining the social role of higher education.

There is a need for systematic assessment of the quality of teaching, so that students can acquire a critical spirit together with the instruments needed for carrying out a professional role, enabling some of them to engage in serious research, and endowing all of them with the dignity of men and women of critical conscience.

*Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you all very much indeed.~*