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# THE CHALLENGE OF UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY IN EUROPEAN UNIVERSITIES

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*By Luc WEBER*

*University of Geneva*

*Vice-president IAU*

*Member of the Board EUA*

## ■ University autonomy:

- ü ... Is – as a principle - as old as the creation of the university
  - Development of Guilds (*universitas*)
  - Struggle for independence from local authorities and the church
  - Autonomy given by the pope or the emperor (Bologne (1158), Paris (1200) and Oxford (1214))
- ü ...Has been challenged, in particular in the 18th century (France and England)
- ü ...Benefited greatly from the creation of the University of Berlin by Wilhelm von Humbolt (the University must secure the link between teaching and research)
- ü ...is constantly reasserted
  - "... The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies... »(Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988)
  - "Higher education institutions ... should enjoy ... full academic autonomy and freedom...." (UNESCO World Declaration 1998)
- ü ... allow for divergences between the acceptance of the principle and its implementation

## ■ Aims of this contribution:

- ü To justify university autonomy
- ü To define university autonomy
- ü To examine the implementation of university autonomy in Europe and analyze critically the multiplication set

## ■ Outline

- ü **Part I: The ideal contract between society and university regarding University autonomy**
  - Responsive and responsible universities
  - Justification and implication of university autonomy
- ü **Part II: Object of and restrictions to University autonomy**



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# **PART I**

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## **THE IDEAL CONTRACT BETWEEN SOCIETY AND UNIVERSITY**



- Universities must be **Responsive** to the needs of Society (the students, the economy and the State)
- The following needs (or demands) are legitimate:
  - ü Contribute to the knowledge society
    - In training students and researchers
    - Doing relevant research (fundamental and applied)
    - Safeguarding equality of access, and, even, encouraging the enrolment of underrepresented groups,
    - Maintaining the “purchase” price of education as low as possible,
  - ü Guaranteeing efficient and transparent operations
  - ü Ensuring relevance and quality in teaching and research



- Universities should assume the crucial **Responsibility** towards society to be at the forefront of societal change
  - ü Traditional universities remain by far the best placed institutions
    - to secure and transmit the knowledge acquired by and the cultural heritage of a society
    - to create new knowledge and
    - to have the professional competences and the right status to analyze societal problems independently, scientifically and critically
  - ü This is why they are among the oldest surviving human institutions

- The World is in a phase of accelerating change characterized by
  - ü Increased competition for students, staff and funding
  - ü Increasing competition to do research and quality teaching
- These changes provoke a growing tension between the two “R”
  - ü Whereas universities can often be blamed for being too conservative or even neglectful, in other words not enough responsive to the changing environment,
  - ü they may also, under pressure, make decisions without paying due attention to their long term responsibilities
- Converge in the long run, but contradictory in the short run (a “Responsible” University serves best the long term interest of society)



- University « Responsibility », as well as « Responsiveness » have deep implications for society and for universities:
- For society, to grant autonomy to universities and to respect it
  - ü According to *The Magna Charta Universitatum (1988)*: The University must
    - “*Serve society as a whole*”
    - And be “*an autonomous institution at the heart of society*” whose “*research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power*”
  - ü According to an American judge (1957)
    - “*A University ceases to be true to its own nature if it becomes a tool of church or state or any sectional interest*”





- Granting autonomy to Universities is a necessity for two sets of reasons
  - ü An institution cannot be fully responsible towards society if it is fully or even partly under control of the State, of private interest or of a Church
    - Therefore, the institution and their staff must be free to choose the topic they tackle, how they do it, as well as to publish the results, even if they are critical
  - ü Teaching at university level and doing research at the frontier of knowledge are very demanding and therefore restricted to a small number of scholars who have been selected by the institution on the basis of their capabilities
    - Therefore, any outside tentative to tell what universities should do and how they should do it would simply introduce additional constraints to universities without helping them to be more responsive in order to better fulfill their missions.



- The rights granted to universities are accompanied by clear duties:
  - ü Universities cannot pretend to be granted millions of public grants and private support and keep away from external eyes regarding what they are doing with the money
  - ü Universities cannot simply pretend for a total freedom of teaching and research; They have also to guarantee that this is done along the highest standard of the profession, the latest knowledge and in total independence.
- Therefore, universities must be transparent and accountable to all their stakeholders, who, themselves, should control without intervening (“Nose in, fingers out” Franck Rhodes)





# EXTRACTS OF THE GLION DECLARATION (1998)

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- **Universities are learning communities**, created and supported because of the need of students to learn, the benefit to scholars of intellectual community, and the importance to society of new knowledge, educated leaders, informed citizens, expert professional skills and training, and individual certification and accreditation.
- Those functions remain distinctive, essential contributions to society; they form the basis of an unwritten social compact, by which, in exchange for the effective and responsible provision of those services, the public supports the university, contributes to its finance, accepts its professional judgment and scholarly certification, and grants it a unique degree of institutional autonomy and scholarly freedom. Within this compact, the university has a reciprocal obligation for impartial scholarship, the highest professional competence and integrity, the cultivation of advanced knowledge and a love of learning among its students, and a sensitivity towards the need for its services in society at large.

- **Accepting the obligation for accountability.**
- It is the public, through direct state and federal payments, tax exemption, voluntary support, corporate contributions and private gifts — as well as fees for service — such as student tuition, housing charges and patient fees, for example — who sustain the university. To them, the university must be openly and appropriately accountable for the prudent use of its resources. This accountability requires, of course, the fullest level of professional financial reporting and independent professional auditing.
- What it does not mean, however, is accommodation to every political pressure, popular-demand, public interest, scholarly fashion or social whim, whether from within or without. The university must be properly accountable for its "output"; the integrity of its scholarship, the quality of its professional standards, the impartiality of its judgments and the competence of its graduates. But, beyond those things, it must remain sturdily independent, yielding neither to internal activist interests, nor to external pressure, but changing deliberately, selectively and responsibly, in the light of public needs and changing knowledge. Anything less would make it truly unaccountable, as well as fundamentally compromising its essential function.



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## **PART II**

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# **OBJECTS OF AND RESTRICTIONS TO UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY**



- Obviously, the object and scope of university autonomy is a matter of interpretation
- In order to highlight the main aspects of the European situation, proposal of an extreme interpretation of university autonomy. An autonomous university should be free to choose
  - ü The students
  - ü The study programs
  - ü The staff
  - ü The research topics
  - ü Governance systems and leaders
  - ü Budget allocation
  - ü And... its missions



- Main justifications for choosing the students
  - ü Enhance the average quality of the students body and maximize their chance of success
  - ü Adapt the number of student in each discipline to the infrastructure and staff capacity
- The American research universities
  - ü can select their students or, at least
  - ü Are guaranteed to have the best ones (ex. UC System)
- The situation in Europe is diversified
  - ü In most European countries, Universities must enroll of those who held the end of high school certificate (and soon the bachelor degree)
    - Consequences: very high drop out rate, many students not motivated, falling staff-students ratio, poor studying conditions





## CHOICE OF STUDENTS (2)

- ü In other European countries, application for some or many disciplines of a “numerus clausus” rule:
  - Efficiency consequences: delayed diploma or choice of a “second best” discipline; selection criteria often unjust (has the same bad effects than rationing in period of war)
- ü Only few European countries or specific type of institutions in a given country enroll students on a competitive basis (on the basis of their merit)
  - England, Ireland, The “Grande Ecoles” in France
- Comment: an increased competition for enrollment would force institutions to focus on what they do best and improve the overall quality of the system

- Universities should be free to choose the study programs they provide (topic, composition, means of delivery, pedagogy) in order to respond to the needs of their potential students (traditional or not)
- In many European countries, this freedom is restricted by a legal request to have the program approved by the ministry of accredited by a national agency
- Comment; the negative effects are greater than the positive ones:
  - ü Lengthening of the process of innovation,
  - ü increasing risk of a potentially dangerous harmonization (in professional programs)
  - ü “Demotivation” of potential innovators
  - ü The university system would gain from a greater diversification or the programs offered, regarding their aim, content, public expected...
  - ü The market success of the program is a better judge of its adequacy

- Universities should be free to choose their staff (academic) at different levels provided it is done on a competitive basis (merit), worldwide for the full professors
- Justification: Universities are best placed to know what they need and who respond best to their needs

# CHOICE OF STAFF (2)

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# CHOICE OF RESEARCH TOPICS

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# CHOICE OF GOVERNANCE SYSTEM AND OF LEADERS



# BUDGET ALLOCATION

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# CONCLUSION

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