

UNIVERSITY AUTONOMY, A NECESSARY, BUT NOT SUFFICIENT CONDITION FOR EXCELLENCE

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Introduction and content

Magna Charta Universitatum (1998): *"The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies...."*

Communication from the EU commission (2006):

- *"Universities will not become innovative and responsive to change unless they are given real autonomy"*
- *".....In return for being freed from over-regulation and micro-management, universities should accept full institutional accountability to society at large for their results."*

Recommendation 1762 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (30/06/2006)

- *Art 4. "...The Assembly reaffirm the right to academic freedom and University autonomy..."*
- *Art 11 "Accountability, transparency and quality assurance are pre-conditions....."*

Two major messages:

- I University autonomy is a **necessary** condition for excellence
- II University autonomy is not a **sufficient** condition for excellence
 - A Public responsibility
 - B The responsibility of universities and their stakeholders

An aerial photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain range. The terrain is rugged with deep valleys and sharp peaks. In the lower right foreground, a small, isolated red building with a dark roof stands out against the white snow. The overall scene is desolate and high-altitude.

I
University autonomy is a
necessary condition for
excellence

Why should universities be autonomous?

two observations

In history, each time the sovereign restricted the autonomy of universities were period of intellectual and social stagnation or decadence.

The best universities according to recent rankings are very autonomous (exceptions in Japan, Russia or China can be explained)

Why should universities be autonomous?

two justifications

Society needs universities = long term responsibility of universities towards society

- to develop new knowledge and transmit it
- to examine every societal questions freely, with a high level of scholarship and the most appropriate scientific methods

Autonomous universities can be proactive and entrepreneurial

- too much and/or bad regulation, as well as too many short term and often cyclical outside pressures or incentives, are initiative-killing
- and therefore the source of more regulation and political micro-management weakening the institution (vicious circle!)

What is the scope of “real” autonomy?

Autonomy should be secured towards:

- the State,
- business
- religion (or any other type of spiritually inspired movement)

Main objects of “real ” autonomy:

- internal organization, decision process, selection of leaders
- study programs (official degrees should be regulated by the State)
- choice of staff (academic and non academic)
- choice of students (access promotion at system level)
- financial resources + expenditure policy

Degree of acceptance of autonomy

- Broad – but not unanimous - acceptance within universities
- Relatively good support of the principle at governmental level, but widespread restrictions in its implementation

A dangerous political argument:

- “government should stop funding independent institutions!”
- This argument is dangerous because education and research have a high collective return on investment in addition to the individual return

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II

University autonomy is not a
sufficient condition for
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A The public responsibility

Essential public responsibilities

Council of Europe recommendations (forthcoming)

"..... public authorities should ensure that higher education institutions, while exercising their autonomy, can meet society's multiple expectations and fulfil their various purposes.....:

- *preparation for sustainable employment;*
- *preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;*
- *personal development;*
- *the development and maintenance of a broad, advanced knowledge base.*

■ *Public authorities should also ensure appropriate conditions for higher education and research institutions to fulfil their function of service to society".*

Intensity of responsibility

Public authorities should have:

- *“exclusive responsibility for the framework within which higher education and research is conducted;*
- *leading and/or substantial responsibility for*
 - *Ensuring all citizens effective equal opportunities to higher education,*
 - *Ensuring that basic research remains a public good;*
 - *financing higher education and research,*
 - *the provision of higher education and research,*
 - *for stimulating and facilitating financing and provision by other sources within the framework developed by public authorities.”*

Risks of conflict between public responsibility and institutional autonomy

Governments' higher education and research policy!

- Appropriation of grants (subsidies) of varying amounts according to priorities should be done over time and at a high level of aggregation,
- Contracts between government and institutions can also strongly reduce autonomy

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**B The responsibility of
universities**

The main question: are universities as good as they could and should (accountability)

Universities are, traditionally, decentralised institutions where most of the decisions are prepared at the “base” of the virtual hierarchy; this is also where most of the competence lays (shared governance)

The assumption are:

- that academics and students do always what is best for them and
- that their decisions and behaviour is in the best advantage of the whole institution

The reality:

- It is true that universities aim at quality and do adapt to the changing environment, thanks to the capacity of adaptation of their academics and to the newly recruited faculty!
- However, do they adapt fast enough?

My belief: traditional universities

- have performed well for centuries,
- do not adapt fast enough today and that it is partly their responsibility

The rapidly changing environment is a real challenge for universities

In general:

- Globalization and emergence of gigantic new economic powers
- Exponential scientific and technological progress
- In Europe, the Bologna process and the Lisbon agenda

In particular:

- Participation rate continues to increase
- Demands addressed to universities are increasing (LLL, specialized training, research partnership)
- Cost of research and teaching is increasing
- Public funding is not forthcoming (governments have many other obligations: health, aging population, security)
- New ICT (hard and soft) open new potential for teaching and research (Google, internet II, digitalization of libraries, open course initiative,....)

Consequences for universities: increasing ...

- Competition
- Necessity to cooperate (paradox!) with other institutions and with business (and governments)
- **Necessity to adapt faster to lead the change** (and not to undergo it) (Peter Drucker in 1997: *"in 30 years, universities will be relics"*)

Universities should be proactive (entrepreneurial) and accountable

This implies that they:

- Have a good understanding of their **environment**
- Have a good knowledge of their portfolio (SWOT)
- Set up their **missions** accordingly
- Fix clear **strategies** to meet their missions
- Organize themselves so that they can **make decisions**
- Develop a rigorous **quality culture**
- Are serious with the necessary **accountability** and transparency

In other words, Universities should be better governed, led and managed

Academic freedom does **not** mean total freedom

Traditionally, academic freedom is closely linked with institutional autonomy: does it mean that there is no constraint to academic freedom

In most countries, academic freedom is better protected than university autonomy: academics and advanced students have the freedom to choose

- the subject of their research and methodology of inquiry (this is essential for creativity and innovation as it remains extremely difficult to plan for a new discovery)
- the ways and means to transfer knowledge to students (the transfer of knowledge and of a sense for curiosity does not respond to a unique rule)

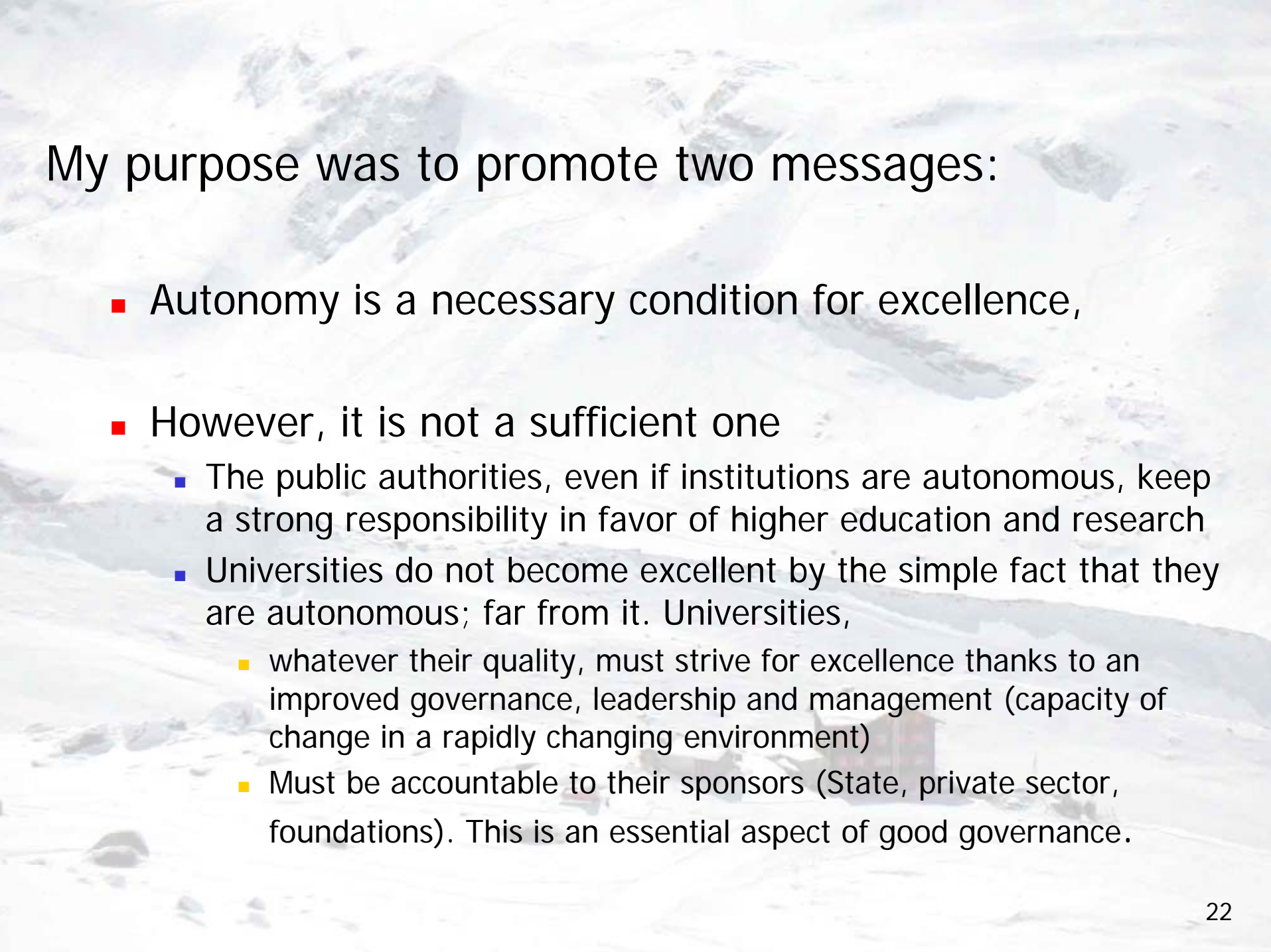
Obviously, the basic principles of academic freedom are quite valid and must be preserved

However, the necessity for institutions to think and act strategically justify today that academic freedom is restricted on a few specific points?

- Research: if an academic must remain free to tackle any topic he considers relevant, the institutions are not compelled to support his or her research financially (special infrastructure and current expenditures) if the topic is not an institutional priority. Eventually, an institution should be able to close a department
- Teaching: institutions should make sure that the content of each course is coordinated with the rest of the program

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BY WAY OF CONCLUSION



My purpose was to promote two messages:

- Autonomy is a necessary condition for excellence,
- However, it is not a sufficient one
 - The public authorities, even if institutions are autonomous, keep a strong responsibility in favor of higher education and research
 - Universities do not become excellent by the simple fact that they are autonomous; far from it. Universities,
 - whatever their quality, must strive for excellence thanks to an improved governance, leadership and management (capacity of change in a rapidly changing environment)
 - Must be accountable to their sponsors (State, private sector, foundations). This is an essential aspect of good governance.

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THANK YOU