

## ***Unlearn reality? Relearn University!***

An average citizen in the street will likely answer the question *What is a University?* with *A place where students go*. But why do they flock there? *The students want to learn*. And how do they learn? *From their teachers, professors in particular and other scholars at the University*. Accordingly, students and their academic teachers form the core of every university.

There is no other institution in Society where the distinction between knowledge worth preserving and the recognition of novel insights worth teaching represents the core and most important value underlying its mission. The eternal character of this value and the resulting research and teaching endeavours are embodied in this University's coat of arms: *Sidere mens eadem mutato*.

Since the foundation of the first university in Bologna in 1088, the idea that a university is an autonomous institution at the heart of society has spread around the globe and it is self-evident that an institution that enables critical and independent thinking in the brightest minds of the next generation – effectively planting sensitive ‘nonsense detectors’ in all parts of society – is the best protection a democracy can possibly have.

This protective function of universities is the more important today as only a minority of countries can be considered fully democratic while technology, which facilitates the spreading of populism and anti-democratic ideas, has become ever more pervasive and globalized. It is therefore worth citing the Magna Charta Universitatum of 1988, which was signed by this University: *“To meet the needs of the world around it, its [a university's] research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.”*

It follows that governments that force universities to become dependent on secondary interests such as the generation of student fees are not doing their job properly as they themselves are only elected to serve the best interest of society.

*“Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of university life, and governments and universities, each as far as in them lies, must ensure respect for this fundamental requirement”* the Magna Charta Universitatum continues to state. Therefore, making research funding mainly contingent upon government ideas is not what can bring out the best in a university.

The University of Sydney Association of Professors (USAP) was founded in 1975 to enable professors to fulfil collectively their special roles and responsibilities. There is untapped potential and we can use the collective wisdom of the professoriate in these difficult times for

universities to feed into the various societal processes that shape this and other universities' future.

With this idea in mind, USAP has started to prepare a conference entitled "What should Universities be?", which will be held from 22-23 November 2018. I would like to encourage all members of the professoriate to engage actively with USAP and to contribute to the preparation of this and future events.

USAP seeks to collaborate with the University Executive and with the Academic Board in particular as it is our belief that the unique role of USAP at this university may represent a model for other Australian universities to adopt in the future. The more productive our association and the envisioned national organization of professors, the better for the tertiary education sector of this country.

New challenges are increasingly arising through technological advances, e.g. in robotics and artificial intelligence (AI) to name recent examples, and the professors at universities are best placed to assess their impact and to help find solutions for society by providing scholarly vetted information and advice.

USAP's annual dinner speeches this year, the traditional Toast to and Response on behalf of the University, will focus on the promises and potential of AI as well as its political philosophical dimension.

In addition to our annual welcome to new professors, USAP is introducing a celebration of senior members of the professoriate who have turned 80 and older in the same year. Only USyd, Melbourne, Adelaide, Tasmania, Queensland and Western Australia were in existence before 1938. Thus, it would not be without these colleagues' contributions that higher education in Australia could have flourished and expanded the way it has.

In closing I would like to point out that there are new communication tools beyond email that allow us to tap the professoriate's collective life experience. We now have professional chats such as Teams, the more advanced Slack and even a personal chat option for those who want to share their views and contribute. If of interest, please get in touch.

Colleagues interested in joining USAP Council are always welcome.

Manuel B. Graeber  
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