

Charter of Responsible and United Universities

Preamble

We, Representatives of Catholic universities of the world, considering:

1 - that the indefinite pursuit of current lifestyles and development is incompatible with harmony amongst societies, with preservation of the integrity of the planet, and with safekeeping the interests of future generations, as was underscored in Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'*;

2 - that the scope and irreversibility of the interdependences that have been generated amongst human beings, amongst societies, and between humankind and the biosphere constitute a radically new situation in the history of humankind and has irrevocably changed it into a community of destiny;

3 - that conscience and exercising our shared responsibilities to the planet and humankind are the expression of our belonging to this community of destiny;

4 - that the scope of today's necessary changes is out of our reach as individuals and requires the commitment of all people and all public or private institutions, starting with university institutions;

5 - that the current legal, political and financial procedures designed to steer and monitor public and private institutions, including university institutions, do not motivate them to fully assume their long-term responsibilities and tend to lock them into competition rather than co-operation, and conformity rather than radical innovation;

6 - that our shared responsibility is to focus our skills, knowledge and influence on protecting our planet and humankind;

7 - that our freedom to teach and conduct research, however justified and real, obscures the correlation of forces that orients our research and our teaching to the needs of the economy or of competing in the international market of higher education;

8 - that given the stakes of the twenty-first century, this freedom, to which we are attached, does not exempt us from laying the foundations of a new contract between ourselves and the rest of society;

In response to Pope Francis's pressing invitation to engage in the fight to save the biosphere and humankind from the dangers into which they have been thrown by the current state of irresponsibility, we adopt, in the name of our respective institutions, the present Charter of Responsible and United Universities, and we commit: to make it the basis of our behaviour and our relations with other universities and with society's actors, particularly those of the territories in which we are established; to promote it amongst our teaching staff and our students; and to draw its consequences for our programmes and teaching methods.

The principles of human responsibility and their application to universities

1. When a person exercises his or her responsibilities, he or she is expressing his or her freedom and dignity as a citizen of the world community.

The university contributes to integrating its students into society as citizens and professionals, as well as socially. But it must also open their awareness of global interdependencies and of their subsequent future responsibilities, make them discover, beyond their individual religious and philosophical convictions, their common humanity and prepare them to take up the challenges of the century by learning that what connects them to others transcends what separates them. It uses every means, particularly digital ones, to share knowledge, experiences and world views internationally in order to turn its students into active members of the world community to be built. It makes this sharing the cement of its bonds with the other universities of the IFCU.

2. Individual human beings and everyone together have a shared responsibility to others, to close and distant communities, and to the planet, in proportion to their assets, power and knowledge.

Far from being a powerless player subordinated to the political, economic and financial powers or to the rules of competition that condition its survival, the university has considerable power as producer, holder and dispenser of knowledge, conferring the force of intellectual and social legitimacy to the knowledge it delivers and to how it is used. It is also, for the territory in which it is established, an open window on world, and a reservoir of knowledge and of expertise that it is called to put at the service of all the actors of society, in particular those suffering from the effects of globalisation and having no hold over their own future and no means to analyse the movement that is pulling them in or to resist it in a helpful way. Feeding conceptual, scientific and technical innovations, its responsibility is to not treat these as a good in itself, but to understand and explain the correlation of forces that will guide their applications, and to promote these applications at the service of the common good.

3. Such responsibility involves considering the immediate or deferred effects of all activities, preventing or offsetting their damages, whether or not they have been performed voluntarily and whether or not they affect people who have rights. It applies to all fields of human activity and to all scales of time and space. It is imprescriptible from the moment damage is irreversible.

The scope of the university's responsibility is the outcome of both the slow evolution of the big conceptual and institutional systems as compared to the rapid changes of society and the acceleration of the challenges it needs to take up, and the perennial nature of the knowledge and skills it passes on to its students, most of whom are called to become managers in the society of the coming decades. If the teaching it dispenses places these students in social and intellectual conformity, cuts them off from understanding the historical, conceptual and philosophical sources of the knowledge it delivers by passing them off as objective, universal and timeless, if it makes them feel that this knowledge is superior to that of other societies or other origins, if it juxtaposes them according to discipline, thus making it impossible to understand the complexity of world and to co-operate with other sources of knowledge, the university, far from preparing its students to lead the indispensable changes, will turn them into obstacles to these changes.

5. The responsibility of institutions, public and private ones alike, whatever their governing rules, does not exonerate the responsibility of their leaders and vice versa.

The university is not assuming its responsibilities if it is limited to offering good hosting conditions to faculties and professors dispensing their knowledge within a disciplinary framework.

Professors have a personal responsibility to seek with those of other disciplines ways of contributing jointly to a more humanistic understanding of the complexity of the world and of the challenges that their students will have to take up throughout their lives. They also have, individually and collectively, the responsibility of questioning the sources of their own discipline, of examining how the knowledge that they pass on is adapted to the needs of tomorrow's humankind and of having the courage, when needed, to explore new answers, whatever the risks to their career path.

The university institution, on its part, has the responsibility of designing new curricula and new forms of teaching, putting the students in the situation of actively contributing to their own development. As per its etymology, the university must be a teaching and living community, and stimulate amongst both teachers and students a critical mind rather than the so often dominant conformity. Through its attitudes, through the career paths it offers its teachers, and through the curricula and teaching practices it offers its students, it must generate a favourable context for intellectual innovation.

Teachers, students and university institutions are not 'off-ground' and cut off from the surrounding society. By using this close environment as a major source for understanding the complexity of today's world, by encouraging teachers to leave their ivory tower and give this environment the

advantage of their knowledge of the world, by encouraging students to make a social commitment to the community, by seeking every co-operation opportunity with the other actors of the territory, the university offers them a pact of long-term shared responsibility to respond to the needs of the transition to sustainable societies.

6. The possession or enjoyment of a natural resource induces responsibility to manage it to the best of the common good.

The university has knowledge and experiences that will be multiplied when they are shared. It has as much responsibility to make them productive through international sharing, in particular amongst the signatory universities of this Charter, as to make them available, in appropriate forms and as a contribution to the revival of community education, to all those to whom they can be useful. The development of communication means and the Internet has opened amazing prospects for such sharing but also involves great dangers in terms of manipulation, knowledge fragmentation and generalised relativism. The university's responsibility is use these opportunities to develop, collegially, new forms of pedagogy that will benefiting the poorest universities as much as the best equipped, and to guard against risks and drifts by privileging paths of structured knowledge and by helping students train in critical use and understanding of the new media.

It is responsible, through its various disciplinary teachings, in particular law, economics and governance, for showing the abusive tendencies of an absolute and individualistic conception of property, intellectual or material, and for promoting both recognition of the responsibilities, in particular to protect and share, that are attached to property and co-operative forms of managing the common goods, natural resources in particular. In addition, student life offers many opportunities to learn co-operation, which need to be seized.

Universities manage land and real estate, so they must become a model of sustainable use of resources and energy and the subject of students' concrete learning of their own responsibilities to these resources. And when a university also holds financial capital, it must show how it behaves as a responsible investor.

7. Power, whatever the rules through which it is acquired, can be exercised legitimately only if it accounts for its acts to those over which it is exercised and if it comes with rules of responsibility that measure up to the power of the influence being exercised.

The university and its teaching body are necessarily accountable for the use of their knowledge and power. This accountability is due to the students themselves, the university community and in particular to its peers, the signatories of this Charter, to the territories in which they are established and more broadly, under their social contract with the whole of society. The Charter signatories are responsible for working out the framework of this accountability.

8. No one is exempt from his or her responsibility for reasons of helplessness if he or she has not made the effort of uniting with others, nor for reasons of ignorance if he or she has not made the effort of becoming informed.

A university, taken separately and whatever its size, can feel helpless before the major changes involved in its responsible engagement and before the complexity and the scope of the challenges of our century. Acting alone, an engagement that is too innovative can put its very existence in danger. The knowledge to be built and organised is so new in its content, structuring and pedagogy that no university may be able to achieve this on its own. The Charter signatories commit to sharing out the tasks amongst themselves and mutualising their intellectual means, which can be facilitated by partial recourse to distance learning, to practising solidarity concretely by making available to the poorer or smaller universities the intellectual capital of the richest and largest, to speak out together to promote the model of a citizen, responsible and interdependent twenty-first-century university. They also commit to offering teachers who agree to share in this adventure, comfort and a united community to face the hostility raised by this type of audacity as well as new career profiles allowing this ambition and this courage to be within the reach of as many people as possible.