

Universities for Enlightenment

We, the presidents and representatives of the Rectors' Conferences of Austria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Italy, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and Switzerland, have met today in Vienna in order to discuss what role universities should play in today's societies.

We express our strong belief in the fundamental values of higher education that reflect the achievements of enlightenment. Academic freedom and integrity of research and teaching, institutional autonomy, the meaningful participation of students and faculty in higher education governance, and public responsibility for higher education are key elements for its functioning and development. We wish to, hereby, reconfirm the importance of the fundamental principles of the Magna Charta Universitatum, in particular a holistic approach to educate future generations fostering their physical, psychological, and intellectual development.

We are committed to further these fundamental values of higher education and we will strengthen our dialogue with a special focus on shared experiences, both within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and beyond. Furthermore, we emphasize the contribution of higher education institutions to society, fostering intercultural understanding, equitable access, civic engagement, and ethical education, and enhancing social responsibility.

We encourage our governments to support higher education institutions in the fulfilment of this fundamental role and these core values through the provision of adequate resources and legal frameworks. We also call upon governments to prevent any form of undermining of independent research, including arts based research and artistic co-creation, and institutional autonomy.

At the same time, we express our concern at movements on the rise in Europe and beyond that threaten the democratic character of our institutions and societies. Post-truth explanations are gaining momentum in shaping public opinion and political debate and have reached a new dimension through social media. Social disintegration and conflict are continuously challenging democratic principles. Our concerns are heightened against the background of increasing inequalities, nationalism, populism, racism, anti-Semitism, intolerance, polarization, and radicalization as well as pseudo-science and pseudo-facts and other threats to democratic and scientific culture.

We, as higher education institutions and as pillars of society and democracy, strive to prevent and work against these developments. We will remain vigilant and we call on our governments to ensure that national policy measures guarantee these achievements through a strong commitment to Europe based on protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Vienna, 13 December 2018