



11th February 2021

Dr M A Yekta Sarac
President of YÖK
Council of Higher Education (CoHE)
06539 Bilkent/Ankara
Turkey

Re: Public statement regarding university autonomy in Turkey

The Magna Charta Observatory of fundamental values and rights has international responsibility for overseeing the Magna Charta Universitatum – an international declaration and affirmation of fundamental principles upon which the conduct and mission of universities should be based. The document has been signed by over 900 universities worldwide, and is recognised and endorsed by many international and regional higher education associations. The 1988 version was drafted in accordance with United Nations agreements and the 2020 revision updated this to reflect the current global environment in which universities operate.

The 1988 version states ‘The university is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organised because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.’

The Magna Charta 2020 reaffirms that ‘Intellectual and moral autonomy is the hallmark of any university and a precondition for the fulfilment of its responsibilities to society. That independence needs to be recognised and protected by governments and society at large, and defended vigorously by institutions themselves.’

In this context the Magna Charta Observatory is becoming increasingly concerned about the violation of the autonomy of universities in Turkey.

The most recent incident concerns the appointment of a new rector of Boğaziçi University by the country’s President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. On 1 January 2021 an emergency decree from 2016 (KHK 676) was used by the President to appoint Professor Melih Bulu, who is not a member of the Boğaziçi University faculty, as rector of Boğaziçi University. This violates the established rules and practices of university governance and infringes the autonomy of the university. Furthermore, Professor Bulu’s involvement in the AKP party is seen as evidence of a possible political motive for his appointment. This is in contravention of the Magna Charta Universitatum which sees universities as morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power.



The reaction to and harsh treatment of staff and students of Boğaziçi University who have voiced opposition to the appointment of Professor Melih Bulu is also of concern as this is not conducive to free academic enquiry and expression. Boğaziçi University and 34 other universities in Turkey have signed the Magna Charta Universitatum.

The Magna Charta Observatory therefore calls upon the President of Turkey to enable Boğaziçi University and all universities in Turkey to reach their full potential for the benefit of Turkey and the world by respecting the letter and spirit of UN agreements and enabling universities to operate in accordance with the Magna Charta Universitatum.



Dr. Sijbolt Noorda

President of the Governing Council

For and on behalf of the Governing Council

Magna Charta Observatory

Bologna, Italy