

Inaugural lecture academic year 2020-2021 by Sanjay Sarma

Online

Chair of the Board of Trustees,
Professor Sarma,
members of the university community,
ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to our inaugural lecture for the academic year 2020/21. This is an academic ceremony with which we are also beginning institutional celebrations for the UOC's 25th anniversary, which – the health situation permitting – will culminate in the graduation ceremonies of November 2021.

25 years of a university open to learning and knowledge, of believing in education as a force for change, and of providing people with lifelong learning... 25 years of a distanceless university where technology and the educational model align to adapt the tempo to each student's situation, combining flexibility with closeness and engagement.

In the words of Erasmus student Claudia Russo, "at the UOC the teaching staff are always there with support and guidance, the university is there for you wherever you are, at any time and in any location". Without physical distances, and without obstacles of any other kind: not from individual needs or obligations, not because of personal circumstances and not from disabilities.

As former UOC president Imma Tubella once said, "we are enriched by our differences and, above all, we are enriched by embracing diversity and talent."

And it is this belief in accessibility and the web that now enables us to sidestep many effects of the ongoing pandemic and to warmly welcome a growing UOC community that now spreads all around the world.

The creation of the UOC in 1995 was an act of disruption. The team led by our founding president, Gabriel Ferraté, shunned the possibility of copying existing formats. Instead of searching out ready-developed solutions they identified revolutionary questions.

And this was where our unique model began: the world's first online university.

Back then, few could have predicted the success of its technological and (most of all) teaching design.

May I remind you that 25 years ago almost none of the current tech giants existed and the World Wide Web was no more than some 2,400 pages.

Today, that 'far-out creation' is still going strong. Strong in education because online education is here to stay – at least if we are right in assuming that there will remain the need for the right methodologies, technologies and equipment, and that digital transformation is equally important for teaching, research and university administration.

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Because there is no field unaffected by digital transformation. Never before have digital skills for all been understood as such a priority, as the cornerstone of any society that believes in fairness.

Quality access to the internet, without paying unreasonable fees and with net neutrality for all, as well as adequate training to make the most of it –an essential factor– are of critical importance in terms of citizens' rights.

This is an area in which the UOC has much to offer. And when I say the UOC, I'm talking about everyone who, each and every semester –students, teaching staff, researchers and administrative staff– show what a master stroke the original venture was.

Nothing demonstrates this better than the 85,000 people who have graduated with us. Nothing demonstrates it better than the daily and continual efforts of the 77,000 people currently studying with us.

A quarter of a century later we are continuing to develop our model, seeking to remain a university of 'firsts' but not just as pioneers, also in terms of leadership.

Being leaders means more than just ambition or positioning. Above all, it means helping improve our world, contributing to projects that can only be achieved collectively.

When we say that the UOC is a global university, we do so because of the societal impact that –as a hub for knowledge, education and research– we aspire to achieve, disseminate and propagate.

The latest example has come in the last seven months. When COVID-19 turned into a pandemic, leading to lockdowns and social distancing all over the world, we immediately put our expertise to use to help out across the wider community.

This took place over various platforms, sometimes working alone and sometimes with other organizations, providing emergency resources both for teachers and for students.

At the same time we have underscored our role as an authority in e-learning in other countries as well, with wide-scope agreements such as that signed with the Ibero-American General Secretariat (SEGIB) to contribute to digital transformation in higher education across that region.

These are exceptional initiatives for unprecedented times, but they are the continuation of a path we were already on, our commitment to transforming society, to learning and knowledge, to being open to the world and its aspirations, to participating in responses to society's challenges, and to consolidating certain values.

«Our global outlook is committed to addressing urgent matters such as gender equality and issues vital to future horizons such as those outlined in the 2030 Agenda's Sustainable Development Goals.»

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This perspective was reflected perfectly by Mariana Mazzucato¹, an economist who is to receive an honorary doctorate from the UOC: innovation is key if we are to achieve growth intelligently; but growth would not be so intelligent without adequate consideration for the redistribution of gains to ensure that our growth is inclusive.

This is true for innovation and equally so for education. Hence the need for lifelong learning, incorporating the full range of education types and all collectives.

¹ [1] Mariana Mazzucato, *El Estado emprendedor. Mitos del sector público frente al privado*, RBA, Barcelona, 2019 (based on the notes of UOC Vice President Àngels Fitó).

Achieving this requires political will, well-fitting models and constant innovation.

In short, technology provides the leverage, but it is the teaching model that puts the student at the centre, and it is the collaboration between peers, the ongoing support and guidance and, overall, the quality of the online learning that ensures that this innovation can be useful at all different moments in students' lives and careers.

This is what we hear from members of our community, for instance, Neus Fàbregues, a social education student who, in her graduation speech representing her graduate cohort, described studying at the UOC using four words beginning with the letter 'p': "planning, patience, perseverance and pedagogy".

But, above all, she added that "thanks to this UOC framework, we are professionals who know how to face our future."

With the fourth industrial revolution now under way, we want to be fully involved in this digital transformation of our future: in the shoes of the people studying, of those training themselves, of those renewing their skills, and of those shaping tomorrow's world.

The question "What is the future of education?" is the subject of our inaugural lecture to be given by the Vice President for Open Learning at MIT, Sanjay Sarma.

In the words of our guest, "Human beings are what we are because of learning," once we've dealt with our basic needs, learning is the main characteristic that sets our species apart.²

This belief in the importance of learning is something Professor Sarma carries into his leadership of both MIT's Office of Digital Learning and the Abdul Latif Jameel World Education Lab, roles that make him responsible for developing new online education models, supervising various blended and open learning initiatives, and working with universities worldwide, including the UOC, on the evolution of education from here forward.

Professor Sarma it is an honour and a privilege to count on your reflections in a debate that challenges us individually as members of the university community and collectively as a society aspiring to a better world. Professor Sarma, the floor is yours.

² Taken from Chris Boebel's interview with Sanjay Sarma, from 11 September 2015, <https://infinitehistory.mit.edu/video/sanjay-e-sarma>

[Professor Sanjay Sarma's lecture]

Thank you very much Professor Sarma for such an inspiring lecture.

To face our future we should know our past. So, for a synopsis of our history, I'm pleased to hand over to the Chair of our Foundation's Board of Trustees, Mr Pere Vallès.

[Speech by Mr Pere Vallès]

[Video, followed by the President speaking again]

We will now hear from our final guest speaker, the Catalan Minister for Business and Knowledge, Mr Ramon Tremosa, who is responsible for the Catalan policy for universities and research.

[Speech by Mr Ramon Tremosa]

Now as we enter the final stage of today's event, before bidding you all farewell, I would like to pay tribute to three groups.

First, our sympathies go to all those affected by COVID-19, and to their families. Second, special acknowledgement to the people who have ensured the efficacy of our health system and public well-being.

And third, sincere congratulations to each and every one of the members of our community who, despite the current abnormalities in global health and the economy, have made it possible for studies, teaching work, administration and research work to continue.

As president of this university, seeing how people at the UOC have managed to tackle and overcome the current difficulties is a motivation that is particularly satisfying, both in an institutional sense and personally. This responsible and exemplary attitude is something I urge you to maintain throughout the ongoing situation, sure in the knowledge that, sooner rather than later, we will meet again to celebrate these first 25 years of our university.

And that is all. Because the UOC does not have a traditional university choir, three years ago we brought out a new version of Gaudeamus Igitur, a song that started out in student beer halls but gained popularity as a universal academic hymn.

Ours is a version that is rather unconventional, but it fully adheres to the highest musical and audiovisual standards.

So, with this solemn and festive Gaudeamus, we bring today's ceremony to a close, launching our academic year 2020/2021 and celebrating 25 years of the UOC.

Many thanks for joining us

Josep A. Planell