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Investiture speech by Dr Tony Bates^[*]

Your Excellency Mr Gabriel Ferraté i Pascual, Mr Francisco Rubio Royo, Mr Toni Badia, Mr Albert Sangrà, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to say what a great honour it is for me to be awarded this title. I feel particularly grateful for the fact that you have honoured a foreigner and, even more so, for being such an unusual variety: a Canadian.

Likewise, it is a great honour for me given that the UOC is an exceptional university. Indeed, it is unique. The only publicly financed university in the world that works entirely online, offering diplomas to doctorates. It is unique because its programmes focus on the needs of the information society. The UOC continues to increase its student numbers, whilst the number of students at other Spanish universities decreases. In recent times, its programmes have only been on offer in Catalan. So, the UOC is not only successful for what it is, but also for where it is. This link between language, culture and quality distance education is what I want to look at.

The UOC has been able to get this far for a number of reasons. If the history of Catalonia begins with Wilfred the Hairy, then that of the UOC has to begin with Gabriel Ferraté, despite his not being at all hairy - he's a ferreter ('an ironmonger'). These two important figures share at least two qualities: a clear vision of what they want to achieve; and the political sense to ensure the proper implementation of their vision. Both have had to kill their dragons, the former maybe real, and the latter metaphorical.

The UOC is an institution created not only at the right time, but also in the right place. The UOC was created ten years ago, at the same time as the World Wide Web which made internet easier to manage and, thus, easier to access. The Web was important to online education as it allowed texts and graphics to be created, stored and delivered over the internet using common standards at a relatively low cost. The first university-level web-based courses started to appear in 1995. The UOC was also created in 1995. No other public higher education institution has focused all its operations exclusively in an online system. Thus, the fact that the UOC was created at such an early point in the history of the Web shows, on the one hand, the vision of the rector and, on the other, the incredible courage and confidence of the Catalan regional government.

Likewise, the UOC is also an example of the importance of what I would call the local culture in an increasingly globalised world. The Catalan regional government's decision to support the creation of the UOC must have been influenced by the fact that the UOC intended to offer its courses in Catalan. It represented the chance to not only be a world leader in technology, but also to reinforce the unique Catalan cultural identity in an increasingly globalised world.

In a society focusing on technology, there is the tendency to ignore the importance of cultural factors, which may even be subliminal. For example, the first open university, founded in England in 1969, is today closely linked to the use of radio and television, which were advanced technologies at the time. However, the university was created by the Labour party so as to offer wider access to higher education and to redress the elitism seen at the end of the 1960s. The UOC was also created to widen access. Thus, the adult learners studying at home with their family evoke an image of the family home and values rooted in autonomy and independence, values upheld by the Convergència i Unió political party which helped create the UOC.

However, the UOC's strong cultural links could not have been enough to ensure its survival. It also had to face up to important economic needs in Catalonia. In developed countries, the economy changes very rapidly. Indeed, the best paid jobs are moving from industry to the knowledge-based sector. We are now part of a completely new economy based on information, unlike industry or agriculture. Work in buying and selling, financial services, biotechnology, computers, education and health not only depend on well trained personnel, but people who can continue to learn as the

knowledge base for their work increases.

E-learning is the ideal mechanism for lifelong education, as it offers flexible opportunities to learn, with the aim of people in work being able to incorporate it into their lives. Obviously, one of the reasons for the UOC's current success is the flexibility that its online courses offer. However, the UOC has to develop quality teaching in order to help students gain the skills needed in a knowledge-based economy. The Conference Board of Canada (1991), Canada's most important business organisation, has clearly defined these skills:

- communication skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening)
- the ability to learn independently
- social skills (ethics, positive attitudes, responsibility)
- teamwork
- the ability to adapt to changing circumstances
- cognitive skills (problem solving; critical, logical, numerical skills)
- personal responsibility and initiative
- knowledge management (where to look for and how to process information)

It should be stressed that these skills are necessary alongside the specific skills and knowledge required in knowledge areas such as science, literature or law. The general skills defined by the Conference Board of Canada can also be taught, if the right teaching methods are used, but these methods differ from the traditional methods based on didactic teaching. Similarly, as in other knowledge-based areas, teaching methods are undergoing constant change. The UOC's challenge is to ensure that it can adapt and modify its teaching methods to meet the changing needs of the active population and society in general.

Knowledge-based economies may be locally based but are often global in scope. A critical skill is the ability to work in teams, in a multi-cultural environment, but also in virtual space and time. Knowledge-based industries are extremely entrepreneurial and volatile. Often small companies replace much larger ones, because in a knowledge-based economy it is the power of the concept and its implementation that matters, not the size of the corporation: think of Google.

However, for innovation to occur, people must be free to challenge existing practices and take risks. This requires the ability to seek information and test ideas on a global basis. The UOC itself of course is a knowledge-based organisation and therefore must continually adapt and re-invent itself. In other words, the UOC must create an organisation where innovation is encouraged and where established habits, technologies and methods of working are constantly reviewed and changed where necessary.

Because of the increasingly global nature of knowledge-based industries, the UOC must understand and accommodate the cultures and traditions of other countries, as well as remaining true to its own cultural heritage. It is interesting to note that despite early fears about cultural domination through the internet, English-speaking countries such as the USA and the United Kingdom have not been able to develop a 'global hegemony' in online learning, despite the advantage of being both technologically advanced and 'owning' the most important language of business. A recent study for instance showed that in Asia, imported courses from other countries were more likely to come from other Asian countries than from the USA or Britain. So although online learning can be globally disseminated through the internet, it needs to be modified and adapted to accommodate local cultures and language.

Thus Europe also presents major opportunities and challenges. The UOC is one of the most technically advanced universities in Europe, with ten years experience of e-learning, and over 500 online courses. However, the majority of courses are in Catalan or Spanish. Also, most of the UOC's existing degree programmes will need to change to fit the new European model of higher education agreed at Bologna. It would be nice if students from other European countries would choose to learn and study in Catalan, but the reality is that international programmes will need to be delivered in English and possibly other languages to attract students from other European countries. Thus, the UOC will also need to develop strong partnerships with other European institutions if its courses are to be acceptable in other parts of Europe. Therefore, the UOC must become an international leader in the design and delivery of multi-lingual and multi-cultural programmes if it is to succeed in Europe.

Thus, the factors that have led to the UOC's remarkable growth and success in the last ten years are also potential threats for the future. It has to take care to avoid becoming trapped in an increasingly obsolete and proprietary technology which is unable to adapt to the rapid changes in technology and education that take place outside the UOC. More importantly, the UOC has to ensure that it develops and supports teaching models that provide the skills needed in a knowledge-based economy. Finally, it has to remain loyal to the cultural, political and social roots of Catalonia, whilst also recognising and adapting to other cultures.

These are considerable challenges, but the UOC has shown that it has the ability, determination and means to adapt and grow. I feel extremely proud to be associated to such a dynamic, innovative and important organisation and I offer my sincerest thanks for this great honour.

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