

Inauguration of the academic year 2017-2018 for the Catalan university system Sala teatre, CCCB

Professor Castells' speech reminded us how the university institution has evolved over the centuries, up until the recent acceleration brought by the technological revolution.

Looking back at the last half century alone, we can see how we've gone from training elites to taking responsibility for a much wider range of the population, and for professionals who today realize learning is a lifelong possibility.

In the language of board games, we could say that university is now for anyone from 18 to 99.

Alongside new training needs, we're now also witnessing technology's impact on teaching. As with all other human activity, from communications to economics, or leisure and social relations, the now not so new technologies have turned teaching on its head.

First, because they've provided us with tools to personalize or improve teaching to previously unthinkable levels. But also because they've led to a paradigm shift, where we've gone from passive 'teaching' to active 'learning', or, indeed, better yet, to the even more active 'learning to learn'.

The first people to understand this change were the students themselves. Indeed, the position of students is one of increasing strength, with a decisive voice in defining and shaping their studies and education. The change is already here and we need to be ready for it.

But we won't be ready for it without a well-prepared faculty that is up-to-date, properly rewarded and motivated. And here, right now, we're not doing our homework properly. To rectify this, as ever we need resources: first, to ensure teaching does not become another precarious form of employment; and secondly, to attract young talent. However, **it's not just about the money.**

As Enric Argullol said over twenty years ago in his last speech as president of Pompeu Fabra University, “[**The current way of organizing faculty**] **has been inherited from**

an excessively rigid tradition” and we need **“to be able to offer and open new ways”**. Recruitment and good working conditions are key for the future of our university system¹.

Increasing what we could call the spectrum of student demand has also led to a transformation in our role as higher education institutions.



«Nowadays, knowledge is no longer limited to classrooms, laboratories and libraries – be they brick-and-mortar or online. Instead, it can be found in businesses, hospitals, museums, public institutions and all kinds of centres. Knowledge is to be found throughout society. It does not confine itself to the university, like a Middle Ages monk in a monastery.»

As professor Castells also pointed out, while continuing with the generation of knowledge, universities have also become nodes: nodes for exchange and dissemination, because our complex world makes complexity the natural medium for knowledge interactions. Adapting to this complexity is a challenge that we take on with relish.

This enthusiasm can also be seen in the way we respond to the call of the UN and its 17 sustainable development goals to transform our world by 2030. This international agenda recognizes the key role of universities, for the first time including the need for both equitable and inclusive higher education as well as research in order to tackle global challenges from a local perspective. Because, in my view,

«universities have to see any technological and scientific revolution or any challenge facing society and humanity as a chance to develop their social capacity through teaching, research and knowledge transfer.»

An excellent, erudite university system is of little use if it closes in on itself.

¹ Enric Argullol, Inauguració del curs acadèmic 2000-2001, UPF, Barcelona.

«Because... without social impact, without an impact beyond the campus, what do we offer the society to which we in fact are indebted?»

This is why we need an open university system committed to teaching, research and knowledge transfer that seeks to provide a social impact, alert to the need to adapt to changes in educational requirements or the nature of work.

In a recent book, **The Wealth of Humans** – with a striking subtitle, **Work and Its Absence in the Twenty-first Century** – Ryan Avent says: *«We have yet to see anything about how the world must change; it will be like the Industrial Revolution²»*.

If I may, I'd dare go a bit further than this columnist for The Economist and say that the coming revolution, which many are calling the fourth or robotic revolution, will simply be the first step towards the building of the informational society that professor Castells describes in his **The Information Age** trilogy published in 1996.

Let me, then, return to the alarming and apparently contradictory role of funding, despite what I said earlier about it **not just being about the money!**

Over recent years, and coinciding with the financial crisis, we've lived through what I call **“the paradox of the Catalan university system”**.

This paradox comes from the fact that this time when we have been able to invest the least is when we have achieved our best results in international rankings.

I do not wish the Secretary for Universities and Research, the Minister for Business and Knowledge nor the President of the Government of Catalonia to misunderstand me, I'm not asking them to increase the cutbacks, quite the contrary...

Obviously this paradox can only be temporary and is due to the inertia of the good work done before and during the financial crisis, and the impact of this crisis on other university systems which are not as accustomed to working within their means as we are.

Indeed, it's fairly clear that funding is a vital condition, but it's not the only condition required to become one of the world's leading universities.

² Ryan Avent, *The Wealth of Humans: Work and Its Absence in the Twenty-first Century*, Penguin, 2016.

So, let me return to my point about 'it not just being about the money!' and say that it's here in particular where our universities have done great work before and during the financial crisis.

Nonetheless, they could do still better if provided with the right tools. This means



«a university system that wants to meet its social mission needs, alongside the money, a favourable context.»

This context would include not just more flexible governance, in line with what the president of the Board of Trustees, Pere Vallès, was saying earlier, but also a legal framework to boost levels of autonomy, as **the current constraints are counterproductive.**

Obviously, there is little room for manoeuvre here, as we are not the ones producing the legislation, but we can make our opinion known. Indeed, you must live with the legal framework you have, like it or not.

However, if asked our opinion, we will provide it confident we will be listened to. At least with the hope that the government and parliament will take it into account or even follow our advice. Because, if asked for our opinion, the message will be clear: less regulation. Or, in other words, **“give me the tools and we'll settle up later”**.

«Each university is different, but the Catalan university system as a whole should aspire to open up and be more flexible.»

I don't know what will happen in the near future, but I'd like to think that if there is a chance to change things, we'll change them for the better.

According to those famous words attributed to Einstein: **“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. If you want different results, don't do the same things.”**

This is why it's important, before making any decisions, to follow the advice of another of the great Catalan university presidents, Josep Maria Bricall:

«first you must understand the logic of things and then you need to know what you can and what you can't change in this logic³».

And, in summary, I believe logic can mark our path.

This path involves a university system able to **provide lifelong education and training** to an increasingly wide-ranging population. It means **students are placed at the centre of learning** thanks to the opportunities technology offers, and a **faculty that is prepared and motivated**. It requires a legal framework based on **trust** and accountability, with **flexible formulas for governance**. It sees **education and research** as the main elements to be **transferred to society**, enabling social impact and influence, all the while making our **centres** into **nodes** able to **generate, connect, disseminate** and **share knowledge**.

Over the coming weeks, as the various courses, modules, research projects and working groups get going, our day-to-day work will occupy most of our time.

But these day-to-day activities are just as indispensable as working together, as individuals and as a system, to ensure the future of Catalonia's universities. The future of Catalan society as a whole.

Thank you very much.

Josep A. Planell

³ Statements by Josep Maria Bricall, taken from "La UB recuerda al rector Josep Maria Bricall", [La Vanguardia](#), Barcelona, 24 February 2016.