

# Speech by the UOC's Vice President for Globalization and Cooperation given at the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development

The logo of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) is displayed in a large, bold, blue font. The letters 'UOC' are partially visible, with the 'U' and 'O' being the most prominent.

Special Event:

Inspire. Change. Together.  
Innovative approaches and  
partnerships to strengthen  
the role of educators &  
academia to implement the  
SDGs

Organized by the International  
Association of Universities (IAU)

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Universitat Oberta  
de Catalunya

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## [Opening]

Good morning,

First of all, let me start by thanking the organizers of this workshop – especially the IAU, with whom we have a very strong partnership – for inviting the UOC to speak on this panel.

## [The UOC & its model]

Let me also present briefly the UOC. The UOC was created in 1995 in Barcelona as the first fully online university in the world, just two years after the World Wide Web. Today, with over 70,000 students, the UOC is among the ten largest universities in Spain.

At the UOC we have our own unique **pedagogical model**. Contrary to the more traditional approaches in online environments focused on lectures (like MOOCs) or on self-paced learning, our model is based on collective learning-building, seeking a balance between the students' individual involvement and cooperation with others. This peer learning is complemented with a continuous feedback process by the academic team.

I would like to use the next minutes to give you two main messages:

1. **Online learning is a key driver for achieving the SDGs, in particular SDG 16.**
2. **Open knowledge is an opportunity for enhanced partnerships, and with it, SDG 17.**

## [Quality online education for SDG 16 and others]

As Johan Galtung said, peace is not only the absence of physical violence. It also means the absence of structural violence, expressed, for example, through unequal access to education, in general, and higher education in particular.

Let me tell you a short story on this very topic based on our almost 25 years of experience. When the UOC was created, it was designed to complement traditional universities, with the **main goal of giving access to higher education to people who had previously been excluded**: people who then lived in the Catalan rural area, far away from a university, or were forced to leave their studies because of whatever reason, either work or family.

Looking now at the profile of our students – who are mainly over 30 (a real example of lifelong learning), who work and study at the same time and who live in more than 130 countries – and also observing the diversity of graduates each year (more than 70,000 in total), we can confirm that our University is reaching people who were previously unreached.

This has not been easy. It has involved continuous improvement of our educational and technological models, as well as many other specific initiatives. Let me mention, for instance, that the UOC has set up a special **scholarship programme for refugees**, one of the most vulnerable groups requiring access to higher education. 105 refugees have been welcomed to our classrooms over the last 3 years.

## [UNITAR – Master's Degree in Conflict, Peace and Security]

Besides these initiatives focusing on increasing access to higher education – reaching out to the unreached –, our experience also shows us that online education provides global classrooms and contributes to educating global citizenship. In this regard I would like to share a specific training example with you, related to SDG16:

Together with the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR), the UOC has been running a **master's programme in Conflict, Peace and Security** since 2013. This programme aims to equip participants with a broad analytical skill set, first-hand knowledge and unique expertise in the field. Thanks to our online campus, people working in conflict-prone environments, within the framework of international, regional, governmental or non-governmental organizations, can receive training in understanding conflicts and acquire skills to handle them better. They do so together with a broad community of students spread around the world. Since it started, 313 students from 79 countries have been trained thanks to this programme.

So, to sum up my first key message, **e-learning, understood as quality online education, is an excellent means and opportunity to contribute to achieving SDG 16 in its different dimensions.**

## [Open knowledge hubs]

My second key message is related to **open knowledge as an opportunity for enhanced partnerships.**

**Knowledge is essential to achieving the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.** I'm sure the vast majority of the audience agrees on that. So we play a vital role in contributing to sustainable development.

However, we are currently faced with **obstacles** that have considerable impact on the **quality** and **efficiency** of knowledge production and transfer. A main obstacle is difficulty in accessing much of the knowledge we already have. The other one is that knowledge is no longer only in academic institutions, but there are few mechanisms available for gathering and connecting it.

An example which showcases the huge changes that can be made through open knowledge is the Zika virus crisis. In 2016, when the virus broke out, the WHO led a consortium of research institutes, funders and publishers that committed to sharing data and results relevant to the crisis "as rapidly and openly as possible". And you all know the result. The virus was controlled relatively quickly, avoiding a greater catastrophe. So my question is, if we could achieve that with the Zika virus, why don't we apply it to all the challenges in the 2030 Agenda?

In that sense, at the UOC we are committed to transformation by becoming an **open knowledge hub**. This involves opening up the University, being a more porous institution and reconsidering not just our role in society, but also society's role in universities.

## [Leadership in diverse partnerships]

In order to contribute to sustainable development, we are setting up partnerships with diverse stakeholders. We are also actively participating in partnerships with other universities to accomplish the 2030 Agenda: at a Catalan and Spanish level, but also at an international level, such as the work with the IAU, where we are leading the setting up of a global university cluster on SDG 3.

## [Conclusion]

On this note, I would like to finish by reaching out to you in the hope of building further partnership initiatives around the world, bringing together our joint expertise to enhance a future world worth living in.

Thank you very much. *Muchas gracias. Moltes gràcies.*