

Inaugural lecture by Professor Michael Murphy

UOC Tibidabo building

Welcome to the inaugural lecture: the academic and institutional event that marks the official start of the new academic year 2022/2023.

Most of the restrictions introduced in the wake of the pandemic are now behind us. But the pandemic, one way or another, has changed us all, both personally and collectively. The UOC has not interrupted its activities during these two years, not even for a day. And I would like to thank the more than 87,000 students in 141 countries for the trust they have placed in us year after year – now for over 25 years! In these last two years the UOC has faced increasing demand from governments and organizations around the world, having become well-known as a source of expert advice.

“We are what we do. And today, we can say that we have done a lot.”

Living in 'interesting times' means you cannot let your guard down, because the changes and the challenges are constant. For instance, there are the convulsions caused by COVID, such as economic recession or political turmoil; but in addition, there are the effects of human stupidity and avarice, as seen in the climate emergency and new wars, among them one on Europe's doorstep that is bringing back the fear of a nuclear nightmare.

All told, we as citizens and as a university are being called upon because, as our guest today, Professor Michael Murphy, likes to remind us: **the usefulness of post-pandemic universities depends on their ability to connect to the reality that surrounds them.** This is why it is so important to know where we are, to focus on the essential while taking into account the urgent.

In terms of the UOC's immediate future, it serves as an example of the need to persevere with the process to complete internal digitalization and evolve our educational model. And we are looking further ahead, with key projects such as the Poblenou Campus, our three buildings in the centre of Barcelona's tech district, which will let us concentrate our activities. The Campus will play home to our new Interdisciplinary R&I Hub, which will be inaugurated and presented to the public on 28 October.

“There are two key aspects to walking forward: daring to take the step, and ensuring we have the proper support. Move on and consolidate, consolidate and move on.”

Likewise, every so often, we need to stop and reset. In short: to ensure accountability.

That is why, as is now tradition, we will use the opportunity presented by the inaugural lecture to take stock of the past year with a video report and then some words from Mr Pere Vallès, president of the Foundation for the UOC's Board of Trustees.

[Video report]

[Words from Mr Vallès]

[The President speaks again]

Universities are institutions with a long history which, in recent times, has seen two main models exist side by side: the German research-based model inspired by von Humboldt, and the French Napoleonic model focusing on professionalization. Each has its pros and cons, and, unable to choose one over the other, our university system has ended up trying to achieve a difficult synthesis of the two, and not always with the best results.

Indeed, regardless of the model or the synthesis, all higher education institutions have found themselves having to adapt to the so-called "iron triangle" made up of three essential components: access to university for the new generations, the quality of the teaching provided, and the cost. Any change made to one of these components directly affects the other two. In other words:

“it is impossible, for example, to maximize access and quality while minimizing cost.”

Some have said that online education could provide a way out of this dead end, since technology can lead to a significant reduction in costs. However, these savings lead to a divergent scenario. On the one hand, we have new university models in search of business which, instead of using these savings to bolster the other two components, siphon them off as profits, and simply create a new triangle – not an iron triangle, but a Bermuda triangle, where quality and research are forced out to maximize economic gain.

On the other, there are institutions which, respecting their public mission, see the possible savings technology can bring as a means of reinvesting in building a university that can accommodate everyone, and where quality acts as the guiding star for the teaching and research.

These are not merely words.

“In terms of the first component, access, the UOC has shown how it is possible to become an inclusive university: a university for those who are in work and a university for those who are spread throughout the land.”

As for the second component, quality, I am sure that Professor Murphy will cover this topic in his lecture today. As president of the European University Association, and throughout his career as a university president and academic, he has always stressed that **the strength of the European project is intrinsically linked to the strength of its university system**. Because it represents a bastion of social inclusion, of regional development, and of social and technological innovation, and because it promotes values of openness, tolerance and international collaboration.

Nonetheless, this resilience needs ambitious policies and investments, and it needs the system itself to believe in the importance of the role it plays. This is why it so important to have independent evaluations, to commit firmly to knowledge and research, and to take part in and influence how the Europe of tomorrow is shaped, to prepare and work with the citizens of the future.

In short, it is not about reinventing the wheel, it is about being aware of the close links between access, cost and quality in higher education and the need for universities, administrations and citizens to act accordingly, to guarantee essential elements, such as equity, sustainability and employability. Making the iron triangle more flexible is not about personal interest, it is about benefitting everyone.

At the UOC, we have been working on this for over 25 years, alongside the more than 850 institutions in 49 countries that make up the European University Association. And today we have the honour and the privilege of being able to welcome its president. I am sure that his vision and his words will help us clear the way for the challenges we currently face as academics and citizens in Europe.

[Lecture by Prof. Michael Murphy]

[The President speaks again]

Thank you very much, Professor Murphy, for such an inspiring lecture.

Knowledge grows from sharing. That is why we wanted to give different members of the UOC community the chance to ask Professor Murphy some questions.

[Videos with questions and answers]

We are now coming to the final part of this event, with words from the honourable Gemma Geis. We share the same goal with the Government of Catalonia's Department of Research and Universities: “attracting, retaining and recovering talent”, while generating, sharing and multiplying knowledge. Two basic premises to guarantee universities and a country of the future¹ for the generations to come.

[Words from the Minister, Gemma Geis]

[The President speaks again]

And we are reaching our conclusion. In the same way that a chain is more than the sum of its links, **institutions are also more than the sum of the efforts and careers of the people who comprise them.**

“Together, we are greater than the sum of our parts, but without each and every one of these parts, we are not whole.”

Likewise, we need each individual element to work towards a set of shared goals. There is no better example than a symphony orchestra where, despite the vast number of instruments involved, if any one instrument is out of tune, it can ruin the whole thing. But when they all hit the right note... it is marvellous!

Indeed, our collective, participatory *Gaudeamus Igitur*, which will bring this inaugural lecture to a close today, is a fine example. Thanks to an assembly of over 300 people from throughout our community – students, alumni, teaching staff, tutors, researchers and administrative staff – thanks to all these people, and the technology that made it possible during the strictest restrictions of the pandemic to record a version of the quintessential university song, we produced a metaphor for what the UOC is and what we want it to be.

“It is clear that we are better together and that no one should be left out, no voice should be left unheard.”

I would like to wish you, to wish everyone, all the very best for the new academic year 2022/2023!

¹ Gemma Geis, “Una universitat per a les properes generacions”, *ARA*, 15 September 2022, https://www.ara.cat/opinio/universitat-properes-generacions-gemma-geis_129_4489133.html.