

# Opening of the UOC office in Colombia

## Hotel Marriot

Dr Castells,  
university presidents,  
ladies and gentlemen,

According to a recent survey, Colombia is the second-happiest country in the world, behind only the remote Fiji Islands<sup>1</sup>. And much like Colombia, I admit that today I'm the happiest university president in the world.

I am happy for the institution, as the opening of the UOC office in Colombia marks the culmination of a project that started 15 years ago, with exchanges, collaboration and learning from each other.

The fact that so many friends and renowned figures, but above all of colleagues and representatives from Colombian universities have come today confirms two things.

Firstly, that our experience is our greatest guarantee.

And secondly, that in the coming years, we need to work hard to ensure even more success, both through projects already under way and those that are yet to start, supported in part by this new office.

As you know, although people come and go while institutions remain, there are certain lines of work that benefit from consistency.



*«And there is unanimous agreement about this investment in Colombia. This new office is part of a firm, coherent commitment to a carefully thought-out strategy.»*

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<sup>1</sup> HAPPINESS, HOPE, ECONOMIC OPTIMISM. Gallup International's 41st Annual Global End of Year Survey, Octubre-Desembre 2017, <http://www.gallup-international.com/surveys/happiness-hope-economic-optimism/>

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And this satisfaction is both institutional and personal.

My personal satisfaction, and that of my team and everyone at the UOC: from predocs who have just joined us, to – if I may say so – Professor Manuel Castells, an international leader for his work on the information society and a key figure in the creation of the IN3, the UOC research centre specializing in interaction between the digital world and human activity, who I would like to thank for being here on such an important and joyous day.

I mentioned earlier the 15 years of exchanges, not only in research, but also in education and training, through partnerships with Colombian academic institutions and government, as we are firmly committed to incorporating quality online higher education into the university system in this country.

This commitment translates into projects such as grants offered in conjunction with ICETEX to study university master's degrees, or the initiative led by the University of Los Andes and the UOC to analyse the implementation of ICTs in Colombian universities, and teaching methodologies and their impact on academic performance.

These are just a few examples, but I could also mention the joint master's degrees with the universities of Antioquia, Bucaramanga and Pontificia Bolivarian, or the virtual mobility programme that has enabled students at Uniminuto and the Universidad Cooperativa de Colombia to study courses at an online university like the UOC, or the partnership with the National Centre for Historical Memory in an international project to recover the past.

All these collaborations and partnerships are in themselves justification for opening an office in Colombia, as we wish to honour our commitments, holding ourselves to the highest standards and attaining the highest level of satisfaction for everyone concerned.

Similarly, we also want to improve attention and care given our students and graduates, who will soon number 3,000.

And yet, our ambition goes further than this. It always has.

The UOC was founded a little over 20 years ago with the aim of increasing access to higher education through a firm commitment to lifelong training.

We could have copied pre-existing models of distance universities, but we preferred to grasp the opportunity provided by what were then nascent information and communication technologies to invent a university without distances.



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We used technology to create a new educational model based on students' learning, where mentoring and teaching places the student at the centre of education.

It is the quality of our educational model that has guaranteed our position as a benchmark in the Spanish university system and as a key member of the European Higher Education Area.

Technology is the medium. Essential, but not the essence. What is fundamental is our ability to adapt to the needs of society, our proactive attitude towards the challenges of modernity.

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Being online has enabled us to create an inclusive educational model, capable of reinforcing the role of the university as a transformative element in society.

The quality of the model guarantees our continuity.

Two decades on, far from having exhausted our disruptive potential, online education remains valid and continues to offer great potential in areas as important as health, development, sustainable tourism and lifelong learning.

The title of Professor Castell's lecture suggests as much: "The University in the Information Age".

Because, in simple terms, higher education and research centres that do not adapt to this new technological and industrial age are doomed to obsolescence.

However, I must stress, this use of online education must be accompanied by a demand for excellence, recognized experience, proven results, and a desire to create social impact, transform citizens, foster diversity, and coordinate civic society.

This is where we believe the UOC can become a key ally for Colombian institutions, universities and society.

This is essentially the ultimate goal of our new office in Colombia: to be useful, create alliances and strengthen links.

From our home in Barcelona, to Medellín, as both are twinned and share a firm commitment to technology and innovation, we offer our knowledge and know-how, our experience as an official university in Spain and Europe, our willingness to serve and collaborate in the common goal of educating, training, creating and increasing knowledge.

It was the English philosopher Bertrand Russell who said the only thing that will redeem mankind is cooperation.

Our expectations are rather less grand but equally relevant: we believe in cooperation as the shortest route to adapting the UOC model to the demands of Colombian society, the strengths of its universities and the expectations of its institutions.

And to conclude. I began by defining the UOC as a university without distances.

Without distances because technology enables us to be almost omnipresent, from Medellín to Bogotá, from Rihacha to Leticia, reaching the furthest corners connected to the web;

because our model adapts to the pace of our students and society's demands; because our goal is to facilitate access to learning to anyone who is interested, wherever they may be.

Thank you very much

Josep A. Planell