

# **SPEECH AT THE OPENING OF THE 2020–2021 ACADEMIC YEAR AT THE UPC**

Vèrtex Building Auditorium, Campus Nord, 30 September 2020  
Rector Francesc Torres

- **Ramon Tremosa**, Catalan Minister for Business and Knowledge
- **Francesc Xavier Grau**, Catalan Secretary for Universities and Research
- **Ramon Carbonell**, Chair of the Board of Trustees of the UPC
- **Rectors and chairs of universities' boards of trustees**
- **Senior officers in the Catalan Secretariat for Universities and Research**
- **Academic and municipal authorities and institutional representatives**
- **Friends**

*To be what we are, and to become what we are capable of becoming, is the only end of life* (Robert Louis Stevenson).

Today, we formally start the academic year in which we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of this university. As you know, Stevenson wrote some of the most popular adventure and fantasy books of all time, including *Treasure Island*. I would venture to say that, over these 50 years, our adventure as a university can be summed up as the intention of providing knowledge and support so that people can become what they are capable of becoming.

We know exactly what our treasure is: during 50 years of history, we have been able to graduate 140,000 people.

We only have to look at photographs or remember what the country was like in 1971 to recognise the extraordinary change that has taken place in road and communications infrastructure and industries; the improvement in the environment with the recovery of riverbeds, coastal areas, waste management and wastewater treatment; and the improvement in the landscape and urban planning of cities and towns.

These 140,000 people have undoubtedly contributed to making these changes happen. More importantly, they have helped to improve peoples' lives and the world in which we live.

Above all, and I also want to highlight this, the UPC has left an institutional hallmark of rigour and quality that has exuded from our campuses to the cities and regions where we are established (or have been established), so that

engineering, architecture and sciences could contribute decisively to this transformation of the country.

The video that you were able to watch showed us the most significant facts and figures on our university's academic activity. It was complemented by the words of our general secretary, Professor Margarida Espona, who presented the most relevant facts from the report for the 2019–2020 academic year that has ended. After the facts and figures, today more than ever we should highlight the people who make up the university community. We can be pleased with the way the UPC and the entire Catalan university system has responded to the profound challenge of COVID-19. We should stress that our results, attained year after year, allow us to occupy a well-deserved place in the club of leading technology universities in Europe. It is highly commendable for the UPC (and for the Catalan university system in general) to have achieved this with a fraction of the budgets that most equivalent international institutions enjoy. For all these reasons, very special thanks, from the heart, should be given to all the people who have made this possible. We are fully aware of the enormous effort that the entire Catalan university system has made, especially in the teaching area. With respect to those closest to me, I am proud to be able to say that the UPC community, including teaching staff, research staff, administrative and service staff and students, has been equal to the task society expects of us.

As an institution, we are coming out of this situation stronger. Now, more than ever, the importance of our diversity, capacity and presence in the region has become evident. The campuses and the various disciplines have been able to provide suitable responses to the challenges they have had to face in each case. We should be conscious of everything we have done, of what we have been able to achieve and of the fact that, ultimately, we have at a crucial time supported society with the commitment, desire to serve and the knowledge that we generate at the UPC.

This new academic year will again be unusual, as it appears that we will have to live with the COVID-19 pandemic for longer than we would want. As a public service, we are committed to maintaining the University's activity in the best way possible, while safeguarding the health of our community's members. We will tackle with determination any cases that emerge, and we will follow with utmost diligence the protocols established by the health authorities. We have made a significant institutional effort to address the new situations: teaching staff have adapted content and methodology; students have adapted to the new teaching models imposed by the pandemic; and administrative and service staff have provided continuity to the service, frequently through teleworking. We have made considerable investments to adapt classrooms to the prevention measures and to equip them with the required IT and audiovisual systems in record time. These investments will continue with an equipment plan for staff, reinforcement of

prevention measures and the adaptation of spaces, and actions to improve distance learning. Our aim has also been to extend and improve the support provided to students, particularly those who are joining our community this year. We will make the transition to university as smooth as possible in such a complicated situation. We want them to feel supported and protected.

I am sure that these times of uncertainty have and will serve to empower the people in our community and strengthen the driving role that the UPC should have in our field: the field of engineering, technology, science and architecture. It has been demonstrated that a commitment to knowledge, innovation and technology is essential for the future of Catalonia and we will not lose our resolve.

The figures and academic results that we have presented today should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that we are largely before a mirage. We are accompanied today by the Minister for Business and Knowledge, whom we congratulate on his recent appointment. I imagine that he would expect us to take advantage of this occasion to repeat the list of requests and demands that rectors have been making for the entire Catalan university system. We know that the Secretariat of Universities and Research is aware of the issues and is working to improve the system. This year, it has responded to students' repeated demands to increase equity with a cut in university fees. However, it is crucial to consolidate universities' compensation for the loss of income that this represents. In fact, the list is even longer: the dynamics of universities are long term and we must resolutely tackle generational takeover, investment in infrastructure and facilities and the introduction of a new, more flexible regulatory framework, with the obligatory accountability, if we are to prevent a downward spiral. The advances and progress that the UPC and the Catalan public university system in general have made in recent decades has been prodigious, but we are reaching a limit. The effects of the pandemic could be a final blow for universities if we do not act effectively. The COVID funds, in the framework of the Government of Catalonia's plan for economic recovery and social protection (CORECO), should serve not only to compensate for the costs of the pandemic, but also to make the strategic investments that mark this future path for public universities.

Now more than ever, universities must contribute to a more robust welfare state, look to the future and transmit confidence to society. With our panels of experts, along with government bodies, the production sector and the business sector, we must be a key agent in the social and economic reconstruction of our country. What model of post-pandemic society do we want? We believe that our commitment should involve strengthened public services and a more robust economic base that is diversified and less interdependent, that can generate local jobs and have strategic self-sufficiency. We have shown that we are good at exporting talent to other countries and regions; now we must show that we are good at establishing this talent in our country and making it resilient to the

adversity that we have experienced and continue to experience. You have our institutional loyalty; you have our support and our involvement.

We are fully aware that to tackle these issues it is crucial to have a situation of political normality that the current context and the various judicial processes do not in any way help us to attain. At the start of a new academic year today and as we said last year and the year before that, we call on society, on political forces and leaders to take the path of dialogue in the search for solutions that respond to the different needs and sensitivities of citizens.

As a university, we must face the pandemic but also look to the future. We will continue to promote the three key ideas of our governance policy for the University: the central importance of the student, a federal and jointly responsible conception of the UPC, and a commitment to research, innovation and technology transfer as the distinguishing characteristic of our academic proposal. In this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, we will advance in these key areas under the slogan "A UPC with no limits" to respond to sustainable development goals (SDGs). The SDGs indicate the spirit with which we should tackle our strategic projects in the area of mobility, health technologies, the energy transition and research in the area of hydrogen and fuel cells, industry 4.0, 5G, artificial intelligence, the agri-food sector, data analysis and processing, robotics, building construction and housing, textiles and particularly for the healthcare sector, the aerospace sector, maritime transport, infrastructure, design, architecture, additive manufacturing, new materials, computer science, chemistry, physics, mathematics and optics. I hope I have not left any out; I am sure you will let me know if I have! The academic competence of the UPC in our area is indisputable. However, to advance efficiently, to increase the competitiveness of our groups and the employability of students we must strengthen our reputation and generate confidence within and outside the institution, by aligning our efforts with government bodies and with the industrial and business environment.

As a public university, it is important that we have a presence in society and show our commitment to the challenges that are of the greatest concern. Clearly, we have to connect more and better to transmit the essential role of technology for the economic future and for the consolidation of the welfare society in Catalonia. We have launched projects that will help us, such as the Recircula Challenge and the Aquí STEAM project to promote women's careers. This year allow me to mention in particular Clara Prats, a member of the BIOCUM research group and an excellent professional. I am not sure if she realises how she has collaborated over these months and that she is an example in STEAM fields for all our female students. Thank you, Clara! And thank you to all the woman at the UPC who work hard to break gender stereotypes in the area of engineering and technology. The foam board figures that separate our seats today remind us that we have many inspiring figures and that we must add more female talent to STEAM fields.

Another encouraging project in this respect is UPCArts, which recognises the creative capacities of our community and the range of opportunities opening up in the cultural industries in research and innovation, as well as the symbiosis that exists between technology and culture, as indivisible parts of humanism in the broadest sense.

We are fully aware of the impact of technology, particularly digitalisation, and the sociological changes that it causes in our society. We cannot ignore the rupture that is happening all too frequently between humanism and technology. For this reason, our commitment to contribute to interconnecting both areas inspired the debate at this opening of the academic year. Under the title “When techno-humanism is capital” our goal was to strengthen various ideas. The first you could gather from the *mise en scène*: a dialogue between intelligent people from different backgrounds is always more enriching than one that takes place from a single perspective. As a teacher, I listened with pride to the words of Elisenda, who trained in our classrooms and today plays a key role in matters as strategic as the evolution of the pandemic. As UPC academics, we are happy to reconsider ourselves through the voices of good communicators and journalists. We are also happy to act, which is why on 8 September we held an extended reality (XR) in teaching day in the new Ideal space, led by Jordi Sellas. Miquel Molina spoke to us on the role of a university such as ours in the commitment to make Barcelona a capital of techno-humanism. All of them have really motivated us.

We should mention that the UPC represents around 70% of the public offering of bachelor’s degrees in engineering and architecture. This makes the UPC a leading technology university that has all the elements and a clear goal of becoming a crucial agent in the conversion of Barcelona and the metropolitan area into a capital of innovation. You can count on us. As a university, our role is key in the training of competent professionals and citizens who are committed to the values of coexistence and democracy. Now more than ever, as public servants, our commitment and our mission are indispensable to provide more opportunities for the new generations and to construct a society based on the knowledge economy. Here and now we reiterate our commitment.

I would not want to end this speech without expressing warm thanks to my team. This time I can say that my team is large and limitless (as illustrated in the logo designed by artist Perico Pastor), as online work has had the positive impact of strengthening communication with other university rectors, with the country’s authorities, with the teaching team at the UPC and particularly with the directors and deans. I would also like to thank our administrative and service staff, who have worked so hard during these turbulent months, the students who have been committed from the outset to continuing with their training and who urge us on

every day, and the Executive Council that has pulled together and of which I am proud. Thanks to all of you, we will have a lot to celebrate during this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year at the UPC.

Many thanks to you all for contributing with your efforts to making our shared goal a reality.

*I declare the 2020–2021 academic year officially opened.*

Thank you.