Reflecting on the future: universities post-COVID

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In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, what challenges do universities face? How should the role of higher education evolve? What difficulties will our new scenario bring? How will we overcome them? How does adapting to digital transformation fit in? What should our research model be?

Universities must change, and spokespeople, faculty members and researchers from the UOC have been sharing their reflections on where a roadmap for the coming years should take us.

Sharing knowledge and leaving no one behind

«The way universities manage and share knowledge urgently needs overhauling. We need a model that lets us reuse, redistribute and reproduce research data and results»

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They say you only miss something once it is gone. The same could be said of the education system during the COVID-19 crisis. Following the closure of schools and universities, two things have become clear around the world: their importance to society, and the structural weaknesses they have been suffering for years. Education is once again being seen not just as a provider of training, but as an ecosystem that links us all.

This new focus brought on by the crisis has also shone a light on higher education. Research into the SARSCoV2 coronavirus and how to halt the pandemic has become a hot topic in conversations, and on social media and television news. And while many laboratories continue to work around the clock, universities have also adapted to remote teaching to ensure over one and half million students in Spain are not left without classes. However, higher education as a specific ecosystem, or even part of a richer one, has barely been mentioned in the public debate.

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No doubt, this is partly due to the fact that universities continue to be concerned with 'what' rather than 'what for'. There is much (mainly external) criticism of universities as self-contained institutions which

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contemplate the world from their ivory towers, while very few (normally internal) voices support the role of universities as agents for individual and collective change.

Curiously, it was the UN that saw the possibility for change led by academia some years prior to COVID-19. They did so in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the latest global political agenda, launched in 2015. The 2030 Agenda sets out the major challenges facing us as individuals, communities and inhabitants of planet Earth and sets out the terrain for tackling them. It calls for support from numerous stakeholders, beyond governments and public administrations. It identifies knowledge as key to finding the best solutions in each context and area, something that is becoming clear in this crisis brought on by the pandemic. And if there is one thing universities work with, it is knowledge: the knowledge we generate through research, share with our students and exchange with other members of society. For this reason, now is an excellent time for universities to reposition themselves in terms of a new social contract based on the 2030 Agenda. Now, due to COVID-19, we cannot put it off any longer, and radical change is required.

The need to generate new knowledge to tackle the climate emergency and epidemics goes hand in hand with ensuring its availability to all. Only by putting research within reach of all stakeholders, wherever they are in the world, can knowledge be transformed into the solutions we need. This is undoubtedly one of the lessons of the COVID-19 crisis, during which much of the scientific output from laboratories worldwide is being shared at a frenetic pace. However, most academic

knowledge is still stuck behind a paywall. What is required is a transformation in the current academic communication system, which is more suited to the 19th century, and increased efforts to transition to Open Science, the global movement whose demands include a system that lets us reuse, redistribute and reproduce research data and results. What is needed is open knowledge that spreads out in all directions, including to and from non-academic figures, making our universities more porous, more civic and able to help improve people's daily lives and their environment.

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The 2030 Agenda is also the first international political agenda to demand equal access to quality higher education. Previous demands sought to strengthen pre-school, primary and, occasionally, secondary education. Making quality tertiary education for all a specific goal means understanding university as an important step in building global citizenry. It also means that, more than a step, it is a road map; it is lifelong learning accompanying people throughout their lives and careers in an ever-changing, fast-paced world. Thus, higher education must consider how it can meet these needs more effectively, while also ensuring greater equality. On this latter point there is still much to be done; even today, university dropout rates are closely linked to social inequalities in students' families (basically related to parents' employment and level of education), as shown in the *Via Universitària (2017-2019)* report by the Vives University Network.

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To tackle this, our university system must use all the tools at its disposal, including technology. Whatever the organization, digital transformation does not happen overnight, nor can it be improvised. It also does not make sense to continue debating a false dichotomy between face-to-face and online learning as if, in the words of Professor Rodríguez de las Heras, "they were two sides of a mirror". Both forms already complement one another, and will increasingly so in the context we now find ourselves in.

On top of this, reconfiguration should also force us to look at ourselves in the mirror. As universities, we should aspire to coherence between what we say and what we do. We must set an example. An example that starts with how we interact with the university community. We need institutions that promote truly transformational policies, which do not stop at labels, which turn our campuses into places where we work together more harmoniously. On this front, too, there is much to be done. There are several areas for action, but I will highlight two: the gender gap and the climate emergency.

Far from achieving gender equality, the situation created by the pandemic has only increased inequalities. Urgent action is needed to correct the systemic deficiencies that lead to the loss of so much female talent. Such structural deficiencies cannot be corrected simply by raising the number of female faculty and researchers, as Barabasí et al. reveal in a recent article published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (PNAS) after studying the careers of over 7.8 million researchers around the world.

And with regard to climate action, we cannot limit ourselves to knowledge generation and transfer. We must apply this knowledge internally and contribute by implementing actions to slow the rise in global temperatures. Last May, global warming once again broke all records for the last 40 years, according to the *Copernicus Climate Change Service*. Luckily, activism among young people worldwide, among our students, in demonstrations such as the 8 March feminist march and initiatives such as *Fridays for Future* are a timely reminder that we cannot abandon them or our duty to set an example.

Thus, as universities, let us strive to enrich our educational and community ecosystem, democratizing knowledge and participating in solutions to major local and global challenges. Let us commit to becoming agents for individual and community change, adopting a position that intersects with another of the 2030 Agenda goals: to reduce inequality. If we wish to play an active part in fairer, more equal societies, let us make equality a defining trait of our communities. Because, as Wilkinson and Pickett have said, equality is crucial for the quality of large-scale social relations, aiding ecological sustainability and psychosocial well-being for all. We need to embrace the 2030 Agenda's guiding principle and leave no one behind.

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