



Inaugural Speech by Dr Javier Lafuente, Rector of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

Rector Magnificent,
Honourable Councillor for Business and Knowledge of the Government of Catalonia,
Illustrious Mayor of Cerdanyola del Vallès,
Chair of the Board of Trustees,
Secretary of Universities and Research of the Government of Catalonia,
General Secretary,
Vice-rectors,
Rectors,
Deans and the Chair of the School of Engineering,
Directors of Departments,
Students, lecturers, research staff and administration and services staff,
Colleagues,
Friends,
Other authorities and members of the university community following on line,

Good morning everyone.

I would like my first words to be ones of gratitude.

To the rector, Margarita Arboix, for convincing me nine years ago that the easiest thing is to disagree and if you really want to change the Autònoma you have to get down to work. You really changed my life and the view I had of the university when you placed your trust in me and gave me the opportunity to form part of your project.

To the colleagues in the departing governing team, who are also friends, we have worked together and we have worked hard to change the university, and we have done so without economic resources but with determination.

To the colleagues in my own team. We are embarking on this new adventure together; we are doing so at a difficult time and we know that we will have to turn the problems we encounter into challenges to be overcome.

To my family for understanding my distractions and my absences and for always being at my side.

To my parents, today no longer with us, but still with me in my way of thinking and doing. Papa, you always believed in me and encouraged me to do everything that I thought I could.

To everyone who has supported me on this long journey: I have always felt your companionship. Thanks to you I am a very lucky man who has been able to do everything I had a mind to.

Today, this inauguration ceremony is strange because it is different. When I began to write this address a few days ago we still did not know whether we would be able to be together here, whether this would be possible, or whether there would be no public ceremony.

Thinking about the situation in which we find ourselves today, I remembered that practically one year has passed since the first cases of COVID-19 in Wuhan, nine months since the first case in Catalonia and eight months since the total lockdown began on 17 March. I remembered how the pandemic shut down the university from one day to the next, and forced us to work in a different way to keep our teaching and research activities going. Now we are experiencing a hard time once again with the second wave of the virus which once again makes what is already a difficult situation at the university, in society and for people even more complicated. And it is now that I want to remember personally all the people in our community and their families who have left us as a result of the pandemic.

The health situation has aggravated the economic problems that we already had. For a few years now the continual reduction in the budgets has increased the financial pressure on our university. The 2018 financial year closed with a deficit and, thanks to a couple of specific actions, in 2019 the budget was balanced. The situation in 2020 has been terrible because it has not abated an inch and because the pandemic has placed us in a position that we can only overcome with the arrival of COVID funds (as the councillor said at this very table). Unfortunately, however, the funds are aimed at compensating the pandemic in 2020 and at this time the situation for 2021 is full of question marks.

The emergency has prevented us from making progress with a new financing model for universities. With the National Pact for the Knowledge Society, the Catalan Government initiated a strategic plan for change in society, and the pact included a new model of financing for the university system and for research and knowledge.

Councillor, we need this new model to substitute the current one which is very old, provides little funding and is unfair for our university. We believe that the new model should not only contemplate the general needs of all university but should also include indicators in relation to more specific needs, such as those of our campus: we are the only university that has to manage land, with roads, gardens, transport, outside lighting, security, and other expenses.

Of course, this budget crisis has affected all of our infrastructures, but it is the people who have suffered most and who will be most difficult to get back. During these years we have lost talent and witnessed an ageing body of staff, both in administration and services and in teaching and research. The quota for replacement, our capacity for contracting and the lack of financing have produced a situation which is very difficult to overcome, and which demands of us a huge effort. A priority of my mandate is for staff rejuvenation and stabilisation.

Looking to the future, in the framework of the Strategic Plan 2020-2030, our main objective as an organisation is to continue to work towards digitization and transparency in our management. We can take advantage of the work carried out over the years and generate agreements to rationalise and modernise our administration. Simultaneously we will carry out an analysis of the basic management structures in the search for efficiency, in harmony with organisational changes.

We are thinking of an integrated management of people. The Training Unit has to guarantee that the training needs of the people at the UAB (both Administration and Services and Teaching and Research) are met. We will work to establish a professional career path for all the staff at the Autònoma.

Considering the possible changes that may be brought about by the PDI Statute, we need to rethink the model for teaching dedication and introduce parameters to reward good research and transfer, but also, and no less important, quality in teaching, teaching innovation and management.

For students, our premise is to ensure equality of opportunities; in other words any students should be able to achieve their training independently of their personal or economic situation and the diversity of social or identity factors, and we will do this by implementing the necessary specific educational resources.

I consider it essential to promote employability and entrepreneurship among students as transversal competences that will allow them to identify opportunities and overcome the challenges presented in society.

The same transversal strategy can also be applied in other areas, such as international relations in which we will work to support the different activities of the university – teaching, research and transfer. We also have one of the greatest challenges for the coming years: the ECIU University – a European university in which the UAB is participating jointly with eleven others. The ECIU University bases its educational offer on the student-centred solution of challenges, so that the challenges presented by society can be addressed transversally towards education and research.

We also want to change the structures at the university from the perspective of equality and inclusion: improving the governance of questions of equality and inclusion from the coordination of all the structures and services involved. We must give visibility and projection to all the actions of social responsibility that our university carries out.

In recent years the UAB has demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to maintain high quality in research and in education, despite the adverse conditions in which we are immersed. These results have shown great dynamism and an enormous capacity for adaptation to what we repeatedly call “new scenarios in a changing world”.

However, perhaps what we need now is not just to adapt to changes, but lead those changes, and the changes must be truly capable of transforming the region and the ecosystem as a whole, from the perspective of responsible and sustainable education, research and innovation.

The new policies promoted by the European Commission point to generating these changes taking into account all the actors in the system and encouraging interaction so that they act as a community using co-creative and participative methodologies, giving a European dimension to the areas of education and research with an undertaking to support the latest generation of equipment and technology.

The university has to take on this leadership role in the region, in society and in drawing in other agents because the pandemic has shown that society trusts science and that collaborative and transdisciplinary work in the scientific community is capable of overcoming the most far-reaching global challenges. And this is one of our missions: to work together *with* society and not just *for* society to identify challenges together and to find the solutions together. From that perspective we will design a more *social* university.

The thing that differentiates the Autònoma from other universities is our campus. We have to be able to integrate the external institutes that are located on it, our own institutes, the different faculties and schools to reap the benefit of this heterogeneity on campus, because that is how we can take on the complex challenges of our society in a transversal manner. We have to be a university that interacts with our surrounding, we have to be a campus that is open and permeable to people, knowledge and ideas.

We will work to improve accessibility, to ensure that everyone can reach the campus in the most democratic and sustainable way possible.

And we also have to make our campuses in Barcelona, Sabadell and Bellaterra a laboratory in which we can apply all the knowledge accumulated by the UAB community. We have to be, and we will be, innovative, disruptive and pioneering.

To finish, I would like to tell you that I am very proud to be the rector of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, the Autònoma, our university, where I arrived in September 1977, 43 years ago, and which I have seen grow, in terms of size, courses, capacities, quality, people, prestige... In short, we have moved on from being a young university to being a great university.

Thank you very much.

Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), 13 November 2020