

# Reflecting on the future: universities post-COVID

## LEARNING TRANS- FORMING

---

**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.**


---

# Playing our part



«Proven scientific fact cannot be undermined by uninformed debates and talk shows»

**Josep A. Planell**  
UOC President

 [Published in \*Huffington Post\* on 29/05/2020](#)

While we still face the crisis caused by COVID-19, a Pandora's box full of post-pandemic possibilities has been opened. There are wide-ranging opinions, from one extreme, with pessimists claiming nothing will change, to the other, with people prophesying the imminent end of capitalism, and everything in between. All just hot air. In my opinion, in such uncertain times, which will stretch beyond the health crisis, only two things are certain: inaction and anxiety have never been a good response to anything, and any improvement requires each of us to play our part, to the best of our abilities and according to our responsibilities. Thus, while contributing to the immediate, humanitarian effort, we must also think about the

part universities are to play in designing the future, and our commitment to fulfilling it.

The lockdown has highlighted a number of issues that directly affect us. Clearly, there has been a reassessment of science and knowledge in general. Laboratories, libraries, research centres, medical professionals, key figures in the humanities, reliable opinion leaders and credible media outlets are valued once again by citizens and society. This public esteem for knowledge from science and the humanities means we need to strengthen universities' role as a hub for creation, connection and dissemination, and do so with renewed critical and self-critical awareness.

We need to question our current research model, with its over-dependence on political and economic circumstances. We need to reconnect it to society and the economy through new paradigms, such as open science and open access. Open science lets us forge links with citizens and get them involved, and open access means research can be shared and multiplied, as seen during the Zika virus epidemic and again today. Greater circulation of knowledge should also lead to specific applications; this requires funding and stimulus for research and the creation of advanced tech-based companies. South Korea's efficiency in fighting COVID-19 can partly be explained by the fact that the country has a manufacturing sector capable of providing the specialist medical equipment that we have to import. Paradoxically, despite our excellent medical professionals and facilities, and the sector's economic and social importance, there are few companies manufacturing healthcare supplies in Spain.

**Proven scientific fact cannot be undermined by uninformed debates and talk shows.**

Likewise, manipulative, misleading and anti-scientific positions must be challenged head on. Intellectual debate is based on disagreement and contrasting opinions, but with a minimum consensus regarding scientific method and criticism, and the search for knowledge and the common good. We do not need to turn science into a new religion or ask for blind faith, but proven scientific fact cannot be undermined by uninformed debates and talk shows, nor can it be placed on a par with arrogant post-truth posturing.

In short, flat-earthers, anti-vaxxers and other charlatans must be given short shrift.

The much-heralded digital transformation has a global impact that encompasses everything from politics to the arts, from production to how we go about our daily lives. Turning to technology generates doubts and concerns about its quality, security and fairness. It is important to understand that the greatest impact of this unstoppable digital transformation is not how it develops on the web, but how it changes the dynamics of work, production, education, society and human relations. Being locked down over the last few months has forced us to reassess those activities that truly require our on-site presence and the changes, possibilities and weaknesses involved in moving them online. Moving online has led to progress in terms of sustainability, immediacy, organization and even efficiency, especially in work and education. Yet, widespread change requires improvements be made to current online work and meeting applications and, above all, updates to the legal framework. We also need to find solutions to technical issues, such as validating and certifying identity and decisions on screen, and other related issues, ranging from work-life balance to urban and civic development. A key factor will be guaranteeing net neutrality and accessibility, which are currently under threat from spurious ideological, economic and political interests. As essayist Marta Peirano said, "we need to guarantee access to the tools for contemporary life, such as the internet, without making people pay by giving up their data and making themselves so vulnerable". Equal access to the internet is not enough on its own, but it is an

---

## Playing our part

essential part of the fight against economic, labour, educational and information inequality.

**Universities, knowledge, science and the humanities need to step up and offer intellectual certainties to allay public fears.**

Those born in the last 25 years as digital natives, as is the case with the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC), have always known that online education cannot simply reproduce the traditional classroom or put all its trust in a technological utopia. E-learning requires adaptations to the teaching model to make full use of its potential and permit distanceless education, adapted to different needs, demands and life situations, and a true transformation in education and knowledge generation. Such transformation should lead to a new form of education.

Finally, all these changes need a shared horizon to provide them with a framework. This is what makes the opportunity provided by the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda so relevant. This new charter of human rights focuses on people, prosperity, the planet, participation and peace. No one has said it will be easy, but it is at exceptional times, such as now, that we need to aspire to exceptional goals. In other words, as a university and as citizens we must adopt political commitments and stances. Individually and collectively, our duty is to act politically. Because we should be concerned about both the present and the future. When the democratic and social progress achieved in the latter half of the 20th century is threatened by certain post-pandemic scenarios, universities, knowledge, science and the humanities

need to step up and offer intellectual certainties to allay public fears. There is an old joke about what cemeteries and universities have in common: you cannot count on those inside to bring about reform. Obviously, we need to prove this caricature of navel-gazing academia wrong. To do so, we need to play an active role in society and take part in the public debate, taking advantage of our experience and knowledge. Because, in the words of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, it is “the capacity to get irritated which turns scholars into intellectuals,” the capacity to take part actively in public debate. While not getting irritated, we must make a commitment and accept responsibility, and show how universities can play their part in defining our shared future.

# 25.uoc.edu