

INAUGURATION OF THE 2007-2008 ACADEMIC YEAR

UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA

3 October 2007

Learning from the past to construct the future

Madam Commissioner of Universities and Research, in representation of the Minister for Innovation, Universities and Enterprise; Mr President of the Social Council; Mr Secretary General; representatives of the Catalan universities; members of the Social Council of the UB; vice-rectors, deans and directors of university schools; representatives of the administrative and services staff; members of other university groups; Dr Pilar Bayer, who will deliver the inaugural lecture, ladies and gentlemen.

Once again, the University of Barcelona, together with the rest of the universities that make up the Catalan system of higher education, celebrates the inauguration of the new academic year, 2007-08, and continues the tradition of devoting the inaugural lecture to a topic that is particularly relevant to society and academia alike. At this ceremony today we have presented a summary of the most significant results of the university's teaching, research and knowledge transfer in the 2006-07 academic year, which are gathered together in our annual academic report. Today's event also gives the university authorities an opportunity to describe and discuss the challenges of the coming academic year inside the context of the current educational, political, economic and social situation, both in Catalonia and in the broader environment.

I would like to begin by remembering all those who have been a part of our university community and who have sadly left us in the last academic year. We transmit our sincere condolences to their families and friends.

This address gives me the opportunity to acknowledge the achievements of members of our University who, in their particular area of activity, have received recognition for their excellence in teaching, scientific endeavour, innovation in the university sphere,

management, or their engagement in social issues through cooperation and solidarity programs. The awards they have won are a great source of pride and satisfaction for our University. We are also grateful to all those who work in less visible positions in the institution, whose enthusiasm, motivation, imagination and energy have helped to make the University of Barcelona what it is today, an institution that is a reference point inside Catalonia. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them all.

Let me mention today something that has become an indisputable feature of the Catalan higher education system, which in recent years has made great strides towards establishing a model of its own. The aim is to resituate the University, to redefine the classical model, to address objectives inside the new functions required by today's knowledge-based society, and to respond to the changes occurring in the social, political and economic spheres. We find ourselves in the complex world of the "*multiversity*", described by CLARK KERR in his ground-breaking book "*The uses of the University*", based on a series of lectures given at the University of Harvard.

The University of Barcelona is alert to the profound changes taking place in the higher education environment. These changes range from the presentation of the foundations of European convergence and the construction of the European Higher Education Area with the horizon of 2010, to the recent documents that define the higher education institutions (HEI) published by the *European University Association* (EUA), the proposals for a definition of a post-Humboldtian European university, and the values of humanism, democracy, institutional integrity, academic freedom and university autonomy laid out in the *Magna Charta Universitatum* and protected and upheld by the Observatory of the *Magna Charta* of Bologna.

Nearer to home, the UB's concern with its model for the future has led to the definition of its strategy plan entitled "**University of Barcelona, Horizon 2020**". Elsewhere in the Catalan university system, studies coordinated by the Catalan Association of Public Universities (ACUP) were published in the **Universities' White Book for 2007**. The Autonomous Government's recent proposal of a **National Pact for Research and Innovation** will also have a broader scope than its title might suggest and will be accompanied by general reflections on the universities, given their vital role in the production of R+D in Catalonia.

This academic year, then, is an ideal moment for reflecting on our progress so far and on our ambitions for the future – above all, for reflecting on the kind of public Catalan university that we hope to leave to future generations. Many models are possible – from the Humboldtian dual model of the European university, in which teaching and research were combined without distinction, to the principles of the visionaries here in Catalonia, above all the rectors Pere BOSCH I GIMPERA and Jaume SERRA HUNTER, who in 1933 led the way for innovation in the university environment with their definition of the new **Statute of Autonomy of the University of Barcelona**, which introduced the University fully into the culture of the country.

Today, with general elections on the horizon, the slightly tense political atmosphere may also have an effect on university activity and university life. The debate on investment in Catalonia, the desperate state of the country's infrastructures, the implementation of the Catalan Statute and the future pronouncements of the Constitutional Tribunal are not the only matters at issue. It is also vital that we stress the need for respect, both for our democratic institutions and for the freedom of speech; the right to express non-conformity, and the reaction to these expressions of non-conformity on the part of the authorities, must uphold these two basic ideas at all times.

I

The 2007-2008 academic year which we inaugurate today coincides almost exactly with the **75th anniversary** of the approval of Catalonia's Statute of Autonomy on 15 September 1932. Article 7 of the Statute opened the way for an autonomous form of government at the University of Barcelona. This experiment in university autonomy, destroyed by the Civil War, enhanced the Catalan identity of our university and modernized it as an educational and scientific service.

This academic year will be full of commemorations and celebrations which will help all the members of the Catalan university community, and society in general, to reflect on the future Catalan university, the **University of Catalonia**. The commemorative spirit must

help our university to prepare for the future. Beginning with today's ceremony, we plan to organize a series of activities (as well as publishing studies and articles written for a general public) which will culminate in a year's time with the inauguration of the 2008-2009 academic year, when we celebrate the 75th anniversary of the construction of university autonomy, finally approved on 7 September 1933, with the coming into being of the Statute of the Autonomous University.

Our institutional publication "**La Universitat**" (of which you will find copies on your way out) reproduces the first studies and articles on this chapter in our university's history. It is our history, but it is also that of the whole of the Catalan university system. As a country, this year we also celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the beginning of the modern Catalan university system, with the foundation of the UAB, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, in 1968.

At the end of this calendar year, 2007, the UB celebrates the **thirtieth anniversary** of the appointment of the first rector of the democratic era, Dr. Antoni M^a Badia i Margarit. His appointment was the result of the efforts of a group of people committed to the university institution and to social progress, and today we recognize our debt to them. On 15 December 1977, at the Palace of Congresses in Montjuïc, a meeting of the UB academic staff was called and attended by 1219 members, a landmark in the consolidation of democracy in our country.

We should also recall that next year, 2008, marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the **Spanish University Reform Act (LRU)**, passed on 25 August 1983, which awoke the Spanish university system from its slumbers, and provided the foundations for the modernization of Spain's universities and their entry into the group of Europe's leading higher education institutions.

II

Let me now turn to the fine lecture we have just heard, entitled "*Teaching and learning mathematics. Variations on a theme by Felix Klein*" by Professor Pilar Bayer, and give a

rather free interpretation of its message. The teaching of mathematics, along with other subjects, is a matter of great concern to us; as we have seen in the section “Mathematics in everyday life”, mathematics has a great part to play in our future. We must do all we can to draw society’s attention to the importance of this fundamental discipline and to the work carried out at our universities.

The Catalan Government has recently made reference to the crisis of the scientific vocations, above all mathematics and some areas of engineering. By “crisis” we mean the declining interest among secondary school students in the university degrees of physics and mathematics. We will be particularly interested in the measures implemented by the Commission for Universities and Research to promote the studies of experimental and engineering sciences.

The main problems are to be found in mathematics degrees, where numbers of new students are falling at all the universities and the drop-out rate is disappointingly high. Perhaps the degree is not particularly attractive to young students: it may appear uncompetitive, and undervalued in the job market. There is also a lack of doctorate students with a strong predisposition for research and academic work. A recent strategy document written to mark the creation of the **Spanish Institute of Mathematics (IEMath)**, in 2006, stated that “... Though the mathematics research system is flourishing, there is no guarantee that new generations will take over from us and continue to make progress in this field ...”

I am pleased to say that the UB’s academic performance in the field of mathematics is impressive, even if it is perhaps undervalued by society. The University of Barcelona has set up its own **Mathematics Research Institute (IMUB)** which has established itself as a reference point in Spain. In the five-year period 2001-2005, the participation of Spanish mathematicians on the international stage increased considerably: 4.9% of specialist publications in this field are by Spanish authors. The data on scientific disciplines in the same period show that mathematical research comes third in terms of productivity, following space science and agricultural science. In Spain as a whole, mathematicians produce around 5,000 international articles, with a volume of citations of nearly 6,000 and a citation impact for each document 1.19. The University of Barcelona, with a number of

citations per document of 1.91, produced around 500 international publications between 1996 and 2006, ranking fifth among Spanish universities. The Autonomous University of Madrid, the Autonomous University of Barcelona, the Complutense and the University of Granada and the UB form the main group.

The activity of recent years may also explain the growing international recognition of Spanish mathematics. A major international congress promoted by the **International Mathematical Union**, the **International Congress of Mathematicians (ICM06)**, was held with great success in Madrid in August 2006.

I would also like to mention the current situation of our plan for degree qualifications, which will come into being in the next few months as a result of the new regulations on official university studies proposed by the Ministry of Education and Science (MEC) and which will be approved in the near future. This is a magnificent opportunity to establish the general objectives of the undergraduate degree in mathematics and to define the set of skills (both general and specific) that mathematics graduates should possess. Society should acknowledge the presence of mathematics at the very basis of Nature, Science, Technology and Art, and should be aware how important it is to have a group of well-trained mathematicians able to develop capacities of analysis and abstraction, intuition, and logical and rigorous thought. The new study plans in the undergraduate degree in mathematics represent a real opportunity for making this important change in direction.

III

One of the main academic challenges facing us this academic year is the implementation of the **map of degrees** at the University of Barcelona, part of the Catalan map of university qualifications. This new development marks a change in approach; it aims to improve learning processes and to respond to the challenges posed by student mobility inside the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The full implementation of this program requires the approval of the Royal Decree governing official university teaching. The decree has been analysed in depth over the past

year, but it was not until the end of June that a sufficiently solid draft document was available for study. An illustration of the urgency of the problem is the fact that, just after taking possession of the post, the new Minister for Education presented a document entitled “The organization of university teaching in Spain” in Zaragoza on 26 September 2006 and, three months later, the “Guidelines for the creation of Undergraduate and Master’s degrees” were published. We hope that this process will come to a satisfactory conclusion within the next few weeks.

The efficacy and efficiency of the system requires, however, decisive action in the **Programming of University Teaching** carried out by the Interuniversity Council of Catalonia. Procedures based on mutual trust between the government and the universities must be applied to allow the construction of an international and highly competitive structure with which all the universities may identify. Unfortunately, the procedures applied to date have been closed, characterized by *faits accomplis*, and have done little to reflect the desire for change. In this context, direct communication with society is essential, ideally guided by the joint participation of the government, the university institutions, civil society and the professional sectors. Evidently we must speak of the costs of teaching, but we must also speak of the objectives of the university system, of the need for mechanisms to promote teacher mobility, and of incentives, if we mean to achieve a genuine balance between different geographical areas and to respond effectively to the supply and demand for places. Possibly this agreement between the university and the society will require, even more urgently than the area of R+D+i, a joint effort for definition or a national agreement on basic principles.

On 12 April 2007 a new act was passed that modified the University Act 6/2001 of 21 December. The responsibility has now passed to the Autonomous Communities and the universities themselves for modifying the **current regulatory frameworks**, that is, the Catalan University Act and our Statute, and thus to fulfil one of the aims which was to make the organization of official university degrees more flexible and to allow each institution to develop its potential for teaching innovation, capitalize on its strengths, and take the opportunity to provide a competitive, diversified range of courses of its own. In an innovative and decisive way, this range of undergraduate and postgraduate courses aims to apply the potential of our centres to respond to the requirements of society. The underlying aim is to maximize university autonomy within the limits of the regulations.

From the point of view of Catalan university policy, the last academic year, 2006-2007, brought a number of surprises. The Ministry for Universities, the DURSI, was abolished and a new Commission for University and Research was set up under the auspices of the Catalan Ministry for Innovation, University and Enterprise. We were concerned to see that several urgent matters which had been left unresolved were not among the new priorities.

The rectors expressed their concern regarding the situation of the universities to several representatives of the Autonomous Government, notably on 26 April 2007, under the intense scrutiny of the media and in the presence of the Minister and the Commissioner Blanca Palmada, who is with us today. The consensus proposal provided for the creation of a series of commissions representing various sectors and open to other agents in the system, in particular the Social Councils, with the aim of identifying issues that had to be addressed urgently within the next few weeks, inside a general governance action plan. These commissions accomplished their task successfully and the information gathered has enabled the Commission for Universities and Research to take into consideration many of the universities' concerns in their management of higher education since that date.

The points of concern inside the university system, especially the public university system, for the medium and long term have also been analysed in the **Universities' White Book for 2007**, and in the definition of the science-university-enterprise model presented in the studies of the Commission of Experts of the **National Pact for Research and Innovation (PRNI)**.

This academic year begins with the memory, still fresh in our minds, of these concerns for the future of the university. Sadly, it is also true that when society at large expresses its opinions on our performance, we are more likely to hear criticisms than objective analyses of our attempts to introduce improvements and of our commitment to society via what is termed our "third mission".

On many occasions this criticism is unreflective and suggests that the critics have not evolved with the times. Commentators discussing university activity frequently express the view that the *glass is half empty, rather than half full*. The pride and satisfaction that the university can legitimately take in its achievements is ignored. Very often, this negative

perception is due to limited knowledge and limited information; perhaps the universities should do more to explain how much they actually contribute to society.

For example, in the last weeks of July, during the negotiations on the University Infrastructure Plan (PIU), it was reported that the universities had obtained all the funding that they had requested. However, the fact remains that no one has explained how university infrastructures really work; no one has made it clear where there are serious shortfalls, or stressed the need for updating existing equipment and installations, or discussed ways of equipping campuses with the best possible facilities. Nor was it explained that the Plan in fact had two parts: the first stage, the simple distribution of funds to each university and the definition of the strategic projects, was carried out at the end of July (even though some of the measures are still to be implemented). The second part of the Plan envisaged meetings to discuss the long-term investments for the universities' science and technology parks under the aegis of the Ministry for Education and Science's funding plans, but these meetings are still to be held.

IV

Catalan universities, and especially the University of Barcelona, are particularly eager to establish permanent mechanisms for presenting their results to society and to the government in order to promote a climate of transparency and accountability in both academic and economic matters, and also to gain recognition for their quality management. One of the mechanisms used by the UB to monitor its activity is external institutional evaluation by a commission representing the *EUA*, who are with us today at this ceremony. Another is the comparative analysis of **international rankings**, accepted as global indicators.

Nonetheless, all too often we have seen newspaper headlines or heard comments from politicians lamenting the fact that "No Spanish university is in the world's top 200...", and further down "... this bears witness to the mediocrity of our universities". Several articles or editorials in this vein have been published in the past two years. The above quotations are from the editorial of a quality newspaper, *La Vanguardia*, published on 8 May 2007.

More recently, on 21 September, *La Vanguardia* wrote: “As for the university rankings, in which not a single Spanish or Catalan institution appears in the first 200, ... it will be many years before we are in the top 50 or 100”. This is a good example of the half-filled glass – drawing a gloomy conclusion, without inquiring as to whether the glass is gradually filling up or gradually emptying. Even though a great deal is to be done, and more support is needed from society and government, we are making major progress, and this should be a matter of pride. Let us look at this progress in more detail.

A study of the two most widely acknowledged analyses of international assessment of universities, the *Shanghai Jiao Tong University Ranking* and *The Times Higher Education Supplement World University Ranking* suggests the following. The results for 2007 in the Shanghai scale indicate that the University of Barcelona is the first of the Spanish universities in the group ranked between 151 and 202, or, in Europe, in the group between 57 and 80. Behind us, in the group 203-304, come the Autonomous University of Madrid, the Complutense in Madrid and the University of Valencia. In the next group, 305-402, we find the Autonomous University of Barcelona and the Polytechnical University of Valencia. The fact is, then, that there is a Spanish university among the top 200, four among the top 300, and six among the top 400. Even though these results are unsatisfactory, it is interesting that two of the five Spanish universities are from Catalonia. If we look more closely, we see that recently the measures used to calculate the rankings have been broadened to include sectors such as *Social Sciences, Engineering/Technology and Computer Sciences, Life and Agriculture Sciences, Clinical Medicine and Pharmacy, and Natural Sciences and Mathematics*. In the case of medicine, the University of Barcelona is ranked between 76th and 108th in the world. We have every reason to be pleased with this result.

In the second ranking, compiled by the *THES*, the University of Barcelona was placed 240 in 2005, but had risen to 190 by 2006, coming second only to the UNAM of Mexico City among all Ibero-American universities.

While we can be proud of this progress, we should also look closely at the data used by these comparative studies (for example, the Shanghai method uses six criteria, of which two refer to the number of lecturers or alumni who have won Nobel Prizes) and consider their implications in relation to our own activities. These data should help us to highlight

areas in which we need to improve, and also areas in which we are performing well but in which there may be a risk of inertia. We should also bear in mind that this method does not consider research in the humanities or in social sciences and does not take account of an institution's success in innovative projects of knowledge and technology transfer.

It is my belief that the glass is half-full. Though the conditions in which we work are far from ideal, the glass is gradually filling up, not gradually emptying. This is true both of the University of Barcelona and of the Catalan university system as a whole.

V

Let me now give a broad overview of the challenges facing us in the academic year that begins today.

In the academic context, the most important process is the **programming of the new undergraduate degrees**. This process is related to the teaching model that the institution aims to promote at a general level, by defining the broad, cross-sectional skills that our graduates will need in order to meet the new demands of society, along with the specific skills characteristic of each degree. What is more, this process will benefit the strategy plans drawn up by the various centres and will encourage the participation of society at large via the advisory services recently created at all the faculties and schools.

The second challenge is the consolidation of a framework for **quality management** in all areas of the university's activity. We must work hard to apply the results of the external institutional evaluation conducted by the *EUA* assessment commission and to bring in the necessary improvements. The recent creation of the UB's Quality Agency to oversee our self-assessment activities and the promotion of good practices in teaching, research and management, in particular in areas in which outcomes are monitored, is an important step forward which we must do our best to promote in the coming academic year.

In the coming months we must also define more clearly **what kind of university we want to build**, what functions it should perform, and how far we want to devote our efforts to its

creation. It is for this reason that we should promote some degree of standardization of the centres' strategy plans, while maintaining the maximum autonomy, and compare and contrast them with the general aims of the institution. This is a long process which has only just begun and has an important part to play in the future of the University of Barcelona at its three levels of activity – in Catalonia, in Spain, and finally in Europe, or on the international stage. There is still much to be done in the areas of organization, territorial planning, governance, quality, accountability, and raising levels of efficiency and efficacy in our human resources structures.

This is an area where more work is needed. By consolidating the perception of a university that is creative, innovative, and efficient, we can promote greater **student participation** (either directly or through their representatives) in the UB project and in the sharing of different ways of understanding the problems that affect us directly – that is, academic problems – and indirectly – that is, social problems. The participation of our student representatives in European or international fora should be encouraged in the coming months, in order to ensure that the new university policies for the construction of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area also take into account other, equally valid perspectives.

In parallel, in the coming months we will have to work on the funding agreement signed recently with a financial institution that will allow us to launch the **Alumni UB Foundation**, an alumni association similar to those already in operation at many leading public universities.

The fact that the plans for **research and innovation** funding – that is, the Spanish government's recently presented *National R+D+I Plan (2008-2011)*, and the EU's *7th R+D Framework Program* – are both in their initial stages is an even greater incentive for us to improve the competitive returns obtained by our research groups at our departments and those in the Autonomous Government's network of centres of excellence. We must also consolidate the achievements of our agents in the University of Barcelona Group who manage the new "transfer function" – the PCB, the FBG, and the AVCRI – especially as regards the assessment of the basic research performed in the areas with the highest level of activity.

I also believe that during this academic year we will see the fulfilment of one of the most important objectives proposed at the start of this mandate: the preparation (and approval) of the **List of Posts** (RLT) at the University of Barcelona. This process should open up various lines of action of a broader scope, such as the assessment of the posts held by UB staff; training and mobility; promotion and the institutional agreement for professional skills-based careers; and a plan for introducing younger staff that is nonetheless respectful of the wishes of the older employees.

In the area of **international policy and mobility**, the University of Barcelona has an important stake as one of the institutions of reference among the small group of universities that will set the trend in this area in coming years. We must build on our excellent experience in the American continent, increasing the activities coordinated with the LifeLong Learning Institute (IL3-UB) and the Hispanic Studies Institute; we must consolidate our position among international institutions by participating as much as possible in student exchanges, so as to make mobility a defining characteristic of our university. Our keenness to enter the Asian market should be accompanied by strategic alliances with other universities, especially inside the Catalan university system. In the field of international research we face the challenge of consolidating the strategic groups of research-intensive universities in competitive projects. The alliances with the University of Bologna, the Bio project with the Karolinska Institute, the IRUN coordinated by the University of Nijmegen in Europe, and the Montreal group, an international forum of public universities, are all examples.

The international dimension – not only of the University of Barcelona, but of all the Catalan universities – will be on display from 27 to 29 March 2008, when this historic building will be host to the Spring Conference of the *European University Association* entitled “*The Governance of European Universities post 2010*”. We should recall that the EUA is the result of the merger, in 2001, of the CRE (the Association of European Rectors) of which the ex-rector of the UB, Dr. Josep Maria Bricall, was president, and of the Confederation of European Union Rectors’ Conferences. With representatives of some 300 European universities and other institutions, it will be an excellent opportunity to demonstrate our capabilities.

To conclude, I would like to stress that all the strategic actions that the university has planned and which I have described quite quickly here, along with other actions I have not had time to mention, must be implemented at the same time as all the other normal activities, which are actually the ones that reflect the true state of the institution's efficacy and efficiency.

But we should also make it clear that for a university like the UB – the highest-ranking Spanish university in the Shanghai scale – to develop its potential, it needs a just system of funding, distributed fairly, that bears in mind its distinctive features, in addition to its efforts to find external financing from the private sector and from competitive calls for applications. The University of Barcelona has not received adequate funding in recent years. We have demonstrated this to all those who have taken the trouble to analyse the issue objectively, with the report prepared by Dr. Anton Costas and published in January 2007.

Of course, some internal decisions, both past and present, have not improved the situation, but the wish of the University of Barcelona, expressed unanimously by its Governing Council and by the Social Council, is to put in place an **economic and financial viability plan** in conjunction with the Autonomous Government of Catalonia by the end of 2007. This must be a fair, balanced plan that does justice to the UB's performance in general, its performance in the specific areas of teaching, research, innovation and knowledge transfer, and the social dimension that our institution has achieved.

I will end by expressing my gratitude to all those who maintain the hope that this project for the future is possible and that we will see it come to fruition; and with my thanks again to those who have been awarded the institution's recognition, to our guest professor, to the dignitaries and guests who are with us today, and to all of you who have listened to this address.

I hereby declare the 2007-2008 academic year at the University of Barcelona officially in session.

Thank you.

