

Universitat  
Oberta  
de Catalunya

Annual report  
Academic year  
1995/96

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## Introduction

University education in Catalonia has undergone a profound transformation since the Generalitat assumed responsibility. There has been a notable increase in educational activity, both in the number of students and their regional distribution.

The desire of the Generalitat was to make university education more accessible to all sectors of the Catalan population with sufficient capacity and motivation to achieve it. This made it necessary to consider the implementation of distance education within the Catalan university system, an education fashioned around the social and cultural realities of the country, with the maximum guarantee of quality and efficiency.

The singularity of such an education and current state regulations brought to light the need to find a formula that would make such an education possible. That is why it was decided to apply the formula of the *Fundació per a la Universitat de Catalunya* (constituted on 6 October 1994), which the Catalan Parliament ratified (29 March 1995) by unanimously approving the Law of Recognition of the *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya* (UOC).

As this law states, the *Fundació* lays down the foundations for the UOC with its principles rooted in the cultural, social, scientific and linguistic reality of Catalonia. It is open to the particular characteristics of a diverse society, with an innovative and efficient teaching model, in co-operation and co-ordination with the other Catalan universities, and with a legal framework that allows for its flexible and fluid operation and the optimum utilisation of the available resources.

This report shows that the project was indeed a success and that the decisions taken have turned an innovative and quality model of university distance education into a reality. As president of the *Fundació per a la Universitat de Catalunya*, it gives me great pleasure to present the results from the University's first year of existence.

**Joan Albaigés i Riera**

*Chairman of the Board of Trustees*

*Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya*

To leave a written record of the first year of operation of the *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya* is an act of responsibility, a report in which we must inform the citizens of Catalonia about what we have accomplished with our budget and with the trust placed in us by the *Generalitat de Catalunya*. For this reason, we want to make public the number of students we have served and the satisfaction they have expressed; the teaching methodology we have applied and its results; the materials we have created and the individuals responsible for their high quality, namely, the authors and the production and style-editing teams; the research conducted, who with and who for; the regional network we are building with the collaboration of local institutions and the services it provides; the technology used and how it has been applied to the education of our students; the way we have organised the University and the efficiency of its management.

I am confident that the information in this report will in some way reflect the work and the professionalism of everyone involved in the UOC: the students, teaching staff and administrative personnel. However, I also believe that a printed document will not succeed in reflecting the enthusiasm, effort, comradeship or sense of responsibility that has been interwoven into the human fabric of the *Universitat de Catalunya*, out of which the first year of the University's existence has risen.

**Gabriel Ferraté i Pascual**

*Vice-Chancellor of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya*

## Establishment of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

Appointment of Dr. Gabriel Ferraté as presidential deputy for distance learning by the Government of the Generalitat de Catalunya (1 June 1994).

Establishment of the Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (6 October 1994).

Approval of the Proposal of the Law of Recognition of the UOC by the Government of the Generalitat and its submission to the Catalan Parliament (January 1995).

Plenary session of the Catalan Parliament (29 March 1995). Unanimous approval of the Law of Recognition of the UOC (Law 3/1995, 6 April) and publication in the DOGC (no. 2040, 21 April 1995).

Report on the UOC by the Council of Universities (4 May 1995).

Adaptation to the Law of the statutes of the FUOC (Board meeting, 26 May 1995).

Appointment of the Vice-Chancellor (Board meeting, 26 May 1995).

Publication of the Law in the BOE (no. 148, 22 June 1995).

Authorisation on behalf of the Commission for Universities and Research for the commencement of activities of the UOC (30 June 1995).

Official inauguration of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (31 October 1995).

Approval by the Government of the Generalitat of the composition and the functions of the Council of the Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (28 December 1995, published in the DOGC, no. 2155, 17 January 1996).

Inauguration of the Bages Support Centre (12 January 1996).

Inauguration of the Gironès Support Centre (8 March 1996).

Inauguration of the Baix Camp Support Centre (15 June 1996).

## Creation of Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

### Antecedents of the UOC

In Catalonia the most direct antecedents of the UOC can be traced to the first thirty years of the twentieth century with the Mancomunitat. However, it was in Great Britain where, in the late nineteenth century, the first distance-learning services appeared, aimed at the vocationally-trained sectors of the working class. These educational services were then exported to the rest of the modernising world.

In 1916, under the presidency of Enric Prat de la Riba, the Mancomunitat created the Extensió d'Ensenyament Tècnic (Technical Education Outreach), or the EET, based on a project conceived by the industrial engineer Cèsar Molins. The EET was founded as a response to the shortage of technical experts, which at that time was problematic for Catalan industry. It was one of the first fruits of the Mancomunitat's considerable effort to promote technical training, given that it had no legal competence in other areas of education.

The EET launched its activities with courses on electricity in 1919 and established a wide-ranging and complete programme for the training of expert electricians, specialists indispensable for Catalan industry at the turn of the century. In 1923, the EET expanded its educational offer when it took over the management of the Agricultural Section of Correspondence Education, created two years before by the Higher School of Agriculture.

The EET was abolished in May 1924 under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, although it took up its work again under the name of *Polytechnicum Postal* in the Ateneu Polytechnicum. During that period the service also launched a programme of correspondence courses in Catalan, causing the number of students to increase.

The EET was re-established in January 1931 by the Barcelona City Council. In April of that year, these same provincial authorities disappeared and the EET then came under the auspices of the Generalitat de Catalunya. During that period, the EET underwent further growth owing to the creation of the Language Committee of the Generalitat for primary school teachers.

The EET's operations were disrupted by the outbreak of the Civil War in July 1936. What is more, it was overwhelmed by the increase in applications for Catalan courses and by the complete exhaustion of its teaching materials as various schools of the Generalitat had begun to use the material published by the EET.

In early 1939 with the military occupation of Catalonia the process of imposing Castilian Spanish in Catalan institutions was initiated: the EET was renamed Servicio de Extensión de Enseñanzas Técnicas (Technical Education Outreach Service), and the Catalan Language Section was replaced by a Spanish grammar course.

### **Fundamental Principles of the UOC**

As indicated in the section of this report describing the creation of our institution, the UOC is founded on the principles inherent in the following attributes:

1. To be rooted in the cultural, social and linguistic reality of Catalonia, and closely linked to its industrial, commercial, artistic and service needs.
2. To be open to all the characteristics of a highly diverse society in terms of age, work, economic level, place of residence and personal situation; open as well to the interests and needs of each student so as to enable them to reach their educational goals through flexible arrangements.
3. To have an innovative, effective and efficient instructional model that guarantees the high quality and suitability of the study materials, the individualised monitoring of each student, easy access to the teachers responsible for them, and, above all, the excellence of the education received.
4. To take advantage of the possibilities afforded by the new technologies in terms of conveying the content and facilitating student-teacher and student-student relations: personal computers, telecommunications networks, e-mail, television, video, multimedia and interactive systems, etc.; and to conduct research in the University's own particular areas of expertise in the educational field as well as investigation of technological features that represent new horizons for the University.
5. To co-operate and act in co-ordination with other Catalan universities and with the entire Catalan educational system.
6. To be organised in a wide regional network, so as to ensure that its work is responsive to the needs and possibilities of the changing reality in Catalonia.
7. To have a legal form adapted to the special nature of distance learning, which enables a fluid, flexible operation with the optimum use of resources.

Thus, the UOC originated:

- As a public service university in the legal form of a private entity managed through a foundation.
- With a solid core of UOC teachers and collaborating educators with whom specific co-operation agreements are established.
- With a flexible, professional management structure, organised according to business criteria and focused on the customer-student.
- With an accessible organisation that covers the whole of Catalonia, based on a network of support and service centres located in the Catalan counties that were established through agreements with institutions in the corresponding local areas and which take advantage of the services and infrastructures of the Generalitat de Catalunya.
- With the use of the Catalan language as the common medium of communication and instruction.

### **The ICDE Highly Values the UOC**

In founding this University, Catalonia has given a very special gift not only to the people of Barcelona but to the world as well. Due to sound planning by Catalonia, the people who live here will have a golden opportunity to acquire a higher education and to update the abilities and skills required in the work force. Moreover, the world will learn from the operation of a virtual university, which had the opportunity to start from scratch, without outdated organisational models and infrastructure to slow it down. We will have the opportunity to co-operate with this university and to follow the development and evaluation, here in Catalonia, of the new models of learning, and to provide education, communication and interaction. This is a mediating university focused on action, able to make quick decisions, free of bureaucratic structures and traditions that often tend to slow down progress and development.

The foresight shown by Catalonia in having organised the University in such a way is admirable. This alone provides a very interesting model for other nations, and the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) is keen to make this information available to the world over.

The University was born and moves forward by the mediating spirit, the culture and the language of the Catalan people. It is like a cool breeze coming from the Mediterranean, a bold, insightful venture that will undoubtedly strengthen the

competitiveness of Catalonia -as it will serve to provide the population with up-to-date abilities and skills- and will be a key to future economic development and growth.

**Mr. Reidar Roll**

*General Secretary of the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE).*

*"Tendències internacionals en l'aprenentatge obert i a distància" (1995)*

*(International Tendencies in Open and Distance Education)*

*The International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) is the international association of the national and regional professionals, institutions and associations of open and distance education. With its head office in Oslo, Norway, the ICDE is an organisation that co-ordinates and promotes knowledge and improvement of open and distance education. More than one hundred countries are represented either directly or through their regional associations. The ICDE is a member of the UNO through UNESCO.*

*The institutional members of the ICDE are specialised in all types of open-education systems in addition to vocational training and other systems of education not officially recognised by their respective governments. Through the ICDE, students and professors from all over the world share their experiences, interests and successes from the distance-education environment.*

## The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya

### Legal Framework and Internal Structure

When the time came to set up the Universitat Oberta, the Generalitat de Catalunya, sensitive to the special circumstances of distance education, changed the legal procedures that had been used up to that point for the creation of universities in the public university system. The Generalitat promoted the constitution of a private foundation, made up of non-profit institutions, from all over Catalonia, with a tradition of offering educational and cultural activities, and in the very session of the foundation's constitution, the Generalitat became part of it in a way that assured that members of the public sector would have the majority stake.

The fact that a private foundation created a university in which the Generalitat was the majority stakeholder succeeded in making the University private and took advantage of all the possibilities of flexibility in its management and internal organisation while at the same time avoiding the need to meet certain technical requirements that were necessary in establishing a conventional university. Control by the Government of the Generalitat was absolutely necessary given the fact that the University was financed primarily by a specific item in the Government's budget, and in this way the University became part of the public sector while its management was of a private nature.

The Law of Recognition of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya underpinned this orientation and confirmed the University's place in the public university network, with the inclusion of a specific item in the Generalitat's budget, with parliamentary control, with the sanctioning of the executive body in the naming of the Vice-Chancellor by the Foundation's Board of Trustees. At the same time, the Law guaranteed the capacity of the University to organise itself without being subjected to rules that are inappropriate for a distance-education university. The Parliament's unanimous approval confirmed the formula's success.

This legal framework was indeed more flexible but also more demanding because it meant more freedom while making the University -the Board of Trustees to be exact- more responsible for its successes and its mistakes. With this instrument we have been endowed with a new organisation, one that is more pyramidal than is possible with the other universities, with a strong team of professors who have been selected and hired by the University itself, and with an extremely dynamic management team that guarantees truly professional work.

The other essential element of the University's organisation are the professors who act as counsellors and tutors at the Universitat Oberta even though, in many cases, they form part of faculties of other universities. This formula obliges us and commits us to work towards making their partial collaboration with the Oberta an experience that enriches the educational task that they normally carry out at their own universities. If this is achieved, we will be recognised for those things that make us unique and we will have accomplished our objective to be, in a complementary fashion, an applications laboratory of the new educational technologies for all the universities in the public system.

### **Teaching Methodology**

The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya is a university with the most up-to-date technology, an effective organisational model and numerous public resources. However, what truly brings life to all that the University has at its disposal is, above all, an educational model that guarantees the education of its students. This is why the University's design and pilot programme have been carried out with great pedagogical care, the same care which will continue to be exercised in the future development of the University.

This methodology has had to be made to fit a system of communication and transmission of information based on telematics and, at the same time, has wanted to take advantage of the resources this system has to offer in order to improve teaching methods and make access to scientific knowledge more efficient. The echo that this pedagogical method has had in the international press and especially amongst specialists and institutions dedicated to distance learning reflects everyone's awareness that the Universitat Oberta constitutes a laboratory of pedagogical experiments and methodologies that will affect the future.

The University's model is based on a communication space, known as the Virtual Campus, that provides students with all the academic and non-academic services that can be found on a university campus. However, the UOC's campus is even further enriched by other services, such as the Internet, that are only made possible thanks to telematics. It is in this communication space that work is carried out by counsellors and tutors, two key factors in the learning process.

The counsellor is the person who watches over –accompanies, advises, orients– the student's academic itinerary: he or she greets the student during registration and provides the student with support and help during the entire educational process. The counsellor's function, which is essential to avoid isolation and to help the

students become adjusted to their new environment, has been highly valued in the evaluation carried out by the University in order to verify the method's effectiveness. The tutor, on the other hand, is the expert who directs and guides the study of each subject and is the person who helps solve problems and encourages the student during the learning process of a particular subject area. The third key factor on which this methodology depends is obviously the educational material (books and multimedia products, such as CD-ROMs, interactive programmes and videos) that has been especially designed to make the learning process more friendly and efficient.

The other ingredients of this methodology –attended meetings, support centres, the virtual library– have the same function: to avoid student discouragement, guarantee a solid education, and give students access to university information and education in the best possible conditions. The integration of all of these resources within a university environment dedicated to serving the student and to educational innovation has made the methodology a success.

### **Academic Offer**

Article 4.4 of the Law of Recognition of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya establishes the courses of studies that will be taught at the University up to the academic year 2000-01. Eleven degree courses have been selected according to demand criteria with preference given to those most requested, their viability, and the technical and pedagogical possibilities of adapting them to our model. Those degree courses with less future due to a saturated job market have been rejected.

The study programmes for these degree courses have been designed with only the student in mind. This is a true advantage since few universities have the privilege of creating their study programmes without the need to satisfy the interests of other sectors of the society. Thus, we asked recognised specialists from here and abroad to design different study programme projects. With the projects in hand we were able to decide upon the contents of each course. This process has indeed proved to be worthwhile. The Council of Universities has recently published a report in favour of the work that has been carried out and the University is in position to fulfil the programme approved by the Parliament.

Educational responsibility for each of the degree courses is always entrusted to a Director who works along with the teaching staff, which is made up of UOC professors and other educators who collaborate with the University as counsellors and tutors. The UOC teaching staff, guided by the

different Directors, chooses the authors who will be in charge of creating the materials for each subject and is responsible for monitoring the whole creation process. Moreover, the UOC teaching staff guarantees the necessary co-ordination of the entire educational process and takes a decisive part in the selection of tutors and counsellors. The ultimate goal is to ensure access to knowledge and adapt the curricular itinerary to each student's needs and interests. In this way the degree that students receive at the end of their studies will have true academic, professional and social value.

The Universitat Oberta always initiates a course of studies with a pilot group of one hundred students. The University asks these students to give their critical opinion on the quality of the instruments and materials made available to them. This was done this year with the Business Studies diploma students and with the Educational Psychology degree students. The authors, students and teaching staff have been selected according to their capacity, aptitude and merits that any selection of this nature must possess when responsible for such a large public sector. We have all worked together –professors, students and management personnel– with the dedication and enthusiasm that a project like that of the Universitat Oberta requires. The results, which our assessment has successfully confirmed, have been optimum.

This year the University has also put down the foundations of what will be offered to its doctorate and continuing education students and has been awarded with the first fruits of the specialised research carried out in this educational field, which is the base and the scope of what the UOC has to offer.

### **The virtual Campus**

The Universitat Oberta's first year of existence has verified the viability of a university project already under way with all the risks that having no definite precedents represent. Among the riskier and more stimulating aspects of the project there was, without doubt, the Virtual Campus. Even though the Campus is not an objective but rather an instrument of a distance-education learning, this type of education depends more on the Virtual Campus than a traditional university education does on lecture halls or faculties. On a traditional campus, space conditions; here, it determines. And it determines all aspects of university life: the learning and teaching processes –the stage where interaction between students and professors takes place–, the human relationship between the members of the university community, the services with which the University provides its students, academic management and the University's self-evaluation, information and education, the viability of the project and its future.

As with all other aspects of the University, the Virtual Campus was tested before being considered definitive. It is what we call –and the same process is applied to the learning materials– a pilot experiment. Upon finishing the testing, the Quality Assessment report, which is written every semester by the University, stated that 73% of the students made a good or very good global evaluation of the University and remarked on its easy interface (94%), its pleasant design (88%), and the ease of learning (85%). The results are obvious: the Virtual Campus Version 1.0 has been a highly valued instrument of the academic function for which it was designed.

The Virtual Campus has been –and will continue to be– the primary space of communication at the Universitat Oberta, mainly with regard to academic communication: between student and counsellor, and between tutor and students of a particular subject. However, it has also been the main source of communication for the campus in general, where the students and the Vice-Chancellor have met and spoken, and where students have communicated amongst themselves and with the different sectors of the University. This has all been made possible with telematic spaces identified by the following icons: *Letters to the Vice-Chancellor*, *Tutors' Room and Counsellors' Room*, *Academic Procedures*, *Small Ads* (the place where one can sell a motorbike or organise a dinner), *The Bar* (the only place where one can speak on-line with any member of the University upon previous invitation, and where the Writer of the Month has been invited to converse with the students), and *The Forum* (a place for open debate where all of us can speak our minds).

Through the Virtual Campus, the students have made themselves familiar with the new technologies and writing techniques. The Campus has shown itself to be the antithesis of inhuman technological sterility, which some people feared: the atmosphere has been open, responsible and fun, and some true leaders of opinion have been discovered. On the Campus there are other university services, such as the library, as well as the priceless opportunity to have access to the Internet, information about attended meetings and other University activities, a pro-Bosnia awareness campaign, information about academic regulations, scholarships and loans, and games.

Now that the University has recently inaugurated a magnificent new Virtual Campus (version 2.0), the 1995-96 Campus may seem modest. Technology has advanced, but the philosophy is still the same.

It must be added that of all the students who have travelled through the old Virtual Campus, 89%, which represents 67% of students enrolled, have taken exams and passed, and 89.6% consider the pilot programme a satisfactory experience. And it is the Virtual Campus that has been a decisive factor in this success.



## Main Information and Activities for the Academic Year 1995-96

### Academic Information

#### Students

##### Selection Process

The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya distributes student places among five zones in accordance with the General Development Plan of Catalonia. These five zones are identified by the names Terres de Ponent, regions of Girona, the metropolitan area, the central regions, and Camp de Tarragona-Terres de l'Ebre.

##### Pilot groups

Each new course of studies that is initiated at the UOC is first tested with a pilot group of one hundred students who are given special attention and are committed to co-operating in the improvement of all the aspects that can influence the quality of the course of studies. Students can only enter these pilot groups during the first term. Once the applications are received and to determine the hundred individuals who will make up each pilot group, a selection is made on the basis of geographical location, student profile and academic qualifications.

**Geographical distribution.** To select the hundred students in each pilot group, the percentages of the applications from each of the five zones are applied to the pilot group of one hundred.

**Distribution based on the profile of the population applying for admission.** Within each zone, we take account of the percentages of the various student profiles in terms of age group and the academic background of those applicants who meet the entrance requirements.

**Academic record.** Once the number of individuals who meet the two previous requirements is determined (geographical area and profile), and they have been grouped by blocks, they are then classified in strict order of their academic records or, if applicable, the final score of the PAAU (University Entrance Examinations). When the entire process is complete, students are selected in proportion to the percentages that correspond to the available places in each zone.

##### Regular Groups

There are two registration periods each year and in accordance with the number of available student

places allotted to each zone and those reserved for the different forms of admission, student places are strictly assigned on the basis of the academic records or the final score of the PAAU (University Entrance Examinations), whichever is applicable. As for the UOC's academic requirements, they are the same as those of all Spanish universities.

##### Regional Re-balancing

For the selection of regular groups the UOC applies regional re-balancing criteria limiting student places for the Barcelona metropolitan area to 50% in order to favour the other zones. Thus, the central regions are assigned 24.84% of student places; the Girona regions, 9.22; the Ponent, 5.92%; and Camp de Tarragona and Terres de l'Ebre, 10.01%. In these groups 3% of student places have also been reserved for people with disabilities, another 3% for people in special internment situations, and 5% for the combined district.

##### Student Registration

Students entering the UOC for the first time register in person, as described below:

**Decentralisation.** Students register in one of the five registration centres that correspond to the support centres installed in Barcelona, Manresa, Girona-Salt, Reus, and a provisional centre that will be opened for this purpose in the Ponent region.

**Individual treatment.** Students reserve a day and time to register at the corresponding support centre.

**Counsellors.** Each student is personally attended by a counsellor who assesses and directs the student and provides him or her with information on the more academic aspects of the UOC.

**Assistance.** During registration the students are assisted by UOC personnel who help them with the entire administrative process.

Starting in 1996, with the exception of the pilot programmes, registration can be carried out from the student's home by means of the Virtual Campus.

##### Attended Meetings

Attended meetings are held four times at weekends during the academic year in different towns in Catalonia. A meeting is held at the beginning of

each semester in order to introduce the teachers and the study plans. The other two are held at the end of each semester to help the students review the course material studied up to that point in order to help prepare for examinations.

During these meetings, students may arrange individual appointments with their counsellors and tutors.

At these meetings Saturday evenings are reserved for leisure and cultural activities.

### *Teaching Staff*

#### Selection Process

As stated in Article 4.3 of the Law of Recognition of the UOC, the system of selecting the teaching staff is done publicly and is based on criteria of capacity, suitability, and scientific and academic merits.

Once received, the applications are examined by selection committees presided over by the Vice-Chancellor.

The academic personnel must, on the one hand, have a perfect command of their particular areas of expertise and, on the other, be highly knowledgeable in the use of the tools and possibilities that are created by the new information and communication technologies within the distance-learning environment.

The role of the UOC teaching staff is to facilitate the learning process by acting as mediators between the students and the educational material within the context of the Virtual Campus. Their task, in part, is to encourage and guide active student participation that allows for the acquisition of knowledge. At the same time, they must help the students to adjust the pace of the learning process so as to meet each individual's needs and possibilities.

In order to achieve these objectives, the teaching body at the University includes the UOC's own teaching staff, who work exclusively for the University, and the collaborating teaching staff, which is made up of people who have won prestige in their particular areas of study from the professional world and other universities. In the case of both as counsellors and tutors, the work is centred on guiding the students through their studies and monitoring their work.

*Counsellors.* The counsellors' chief responsibilities are to monitor the progress of the students assigned to them in all aspects of their studies and to guide and advise them throughout their stay at the University. The counsellor is the person the UOC assigns to act as a bridge between the student and the University and who becomes the student's main interlocutor in all that has to do with the UOC but

does not correspond to a particular subject area. The counsellor, who is very knowledgeable in the course of studies the student has chosen, is responsible for helping the student to progress and maintain interest in his or her studies.

*Tutors.* Each subject has its tutor. The tutors' chief responsibility is to guide the student's learning process in this specific subject by correcting exercises and tests and by helping to settle any doubts or questions the students may have with regard to the subject's contents.

### *Educational Materials*

The materials are sent to the students on two separate occasions during the first semester, in July and September, and once in the second semester, in February.

### *International Research and Projects*

One of the key elements of the activities at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya during its first year has been the creation of a research environment that has allowed for the progressive increase in the institution's level of educational quality and academic excellence. Given its particular methodology, the research on methods and technologies of the teaching-learning process is considered at the UOC as a constitutive and indissoluble part of the academic activities of this university and constitutes what we call institutional research.

Therefore, research activity during the first year of the UOC's operation has been addressed to the defining of the global environment and of the basic priorities that give direction to innovative research projects of an institutional character. As stated in the report presented to the Catalan Parliament, the lines of research with highest priority at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya are:

- a) The Virtual Campus
- b) Teaching materials
- c) University education and teaching efficiency
- d) Indicators of academic performance
- e) Curricular adaptations
- f) Educational applications in work and professional environments

With regard to the projects started in the academic year 1995-96, it is worth mentioning the acceptance of the UOC on behalf of the European Union Commission, despite the UOC still being a university project in its beginning stages. A good indication of this acceptance is the participation of the UOC in eight different European consortiums in programmes of research on data and telecommunications systems, multimedia and

interactive systems, and teleteaching. All together, more than 90% of the funds received by the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya during the 1995-96 academic year came from the Fourth Framework Programme (IV Programa Marc) of the European Union.

Also worth mentioning is the part the UOC took in a research project on the application of multimedia systems in education (Multimet), sponsored by the Eurogroup CHER, consortium for higher education and research created in the framework of the Four Motors Group (Grup dels Quatre Motors) for Europe.

#### Description of the Projects

##### *Multimet*

Creation of a CD-ROM that explains how to design and produce multimedia and interactive materials. This CD-ROM is primarily aimed at the authors of such materials.

##### *Teleregions*

A series of teleworking software applications in public services areas (administration, health, education, research networks, etc.). The application proposed by the UOC is the design of a new user interface for the Virtual Campus, which includes technical improvements and enhanced usability, and is better adapted to the organisation of this university.

##### *Biblink*

Publication and distribution of books on tape. Creation and assessment of a virtual library.

##### *Listed*

Development of an application consisting of distance-education solutions through telematics distribution in a public library environment, so that library staff can support the needs of the users and encourage their participation from a Lifelong Learning standpoint.

##### *Delilah*

Development of models, methodologies and tools for new learning environments and their assessment.

##### *Seneca*

A project to determine the requirements for establishing a telecommunications network for distance learning at the European level, based on the ISDN. Development of a platform of applications and services for distance education.

##### *Elvil*

The development of a tool for the research, selection and presentation of public information on parliamentary and legislative proceedings in Europe. The tool will be based on the use of the Web system (Internet). The UOC is responsible for the creation of an educational tool that explains parliamentary and legislative activities to the general public, to professionals and to university students.

#### **The Virtual Campus**

To study at home does not mean that the UOC student is disconnected from what is happening at the university. UOC students can have chats on a daily basis, just like students from any other university; they can consult books available at the UOC or the other universities in Catalonia; they can go to the *News-stand* and look at the newspapers; or they can ask professors to help settle any doubts they may have concerning a given subject. This close constant contact takes place in what is known as the Virtual Campus and guarantees the attention and continuous encouragement that distance education requires. Thus, the Virtual Campus can be defined as the set of functions that makes interaction possible between the different groups that make up the University (students, teaching staff and management personnel) without the need to coincide in time or space.

#### Characteristics of Version 1.0

In the user's interface, which was developed entirely by UOC personnel, the student can choose from the options *Work at Home* and connection to the Virtual Campus. By clicking on the appropriate icon they connect to the Campus automatically by means of a telephone and a modem. At home they can work with either a PC or an Apple personal computer.

Through e-mail students can get in touch with their counsellors and tutors, participate in discussions along with other classmates, or carry out academic procedures. E-mail allows students to exchange information in the form of texts, graphs or audio. The programme used is *First Class*, which has been adapted with the dialogue screens designed to match the local interface. This e-mail works through the server Apple Power PC/8100/120, with 32 Mb RAM and 4 Gb of disk memory.

As an element of internal information all students and teaching staff have access to what is known as the UOC Web where all of the information on the University is available in a hypertext system. Moreover, the UOC has a web on the Internet that

can be accessed with Netscape. These two webs are in a Sun Sparcstation 20 work station, with 96 Mb RAM and 12 Gb of disk memory.

Thanks to agreements signed between the UOC and Telefónica, the charge for these access calls is the same throughout Catalonia and is the same as a local call.

Counsellors and tutors can also access the Virtual Campus from their offices at the other universities by means of the Scientific Ring (l'Anella Científica), a fibre-optics network that interconnects the Catalan universities and the principal centres of research in the country with a transfer speed of 34 Mbps.

In order to facilitate student acquisition of the required computer equipment, the UOC has reached an agreement with computer manufacturers and distributors so as to give students financial advantages when purchasing their equipment. Furthermore, several financial institutions offer students loans at a preferential interest rate in order to make these purchases.

#### Characteristics of Version 2.0

The new version of the UOC's Virtual Campus, which was developed during this academic year and which will be put into operation during the upcoming year, has been fashioned as an intranet, that is, a private-use network that uses the functional and navigational tools of the Internet. The student's computer only needs Netscape 3.0, which is provided by the UOC, in order to access the different areas of education, information and debate. At the same time all students have access to Internet and e-mail.

As distinctive elements of the Virtual Campus there is the integration of the following three elements: e-mail, relational databases, and HTML information pages. The e-mail is Sendmail, a public-use programme available on the Internet while the relational databases are Oracle. All these elements are converted into HTML pages and Java language, which are then sent to the homes of the students and professors.

The hardware that supports the Campus from the UOC's head office is made up of three SUN Enterprise II servers, with a total of 40 Gb of disk memory.

Two of these servers execute processes and give information to the network's users while the third server stores the common data from the other two. This multiplicity of servers affords a greater reliability in the event of possible errors and allows for the Campus's modular growth. This intranet has been created to be able to support up to two hundred users at any one time.

All users registered at the UOC have at their disposal two means of remote access: UOCnet and Infovia. UOCnet is a private commutation circuit network with the capacity for maintaining up to ninety simultaneous connections. This is the type of access preferred by users within the metropolitan telephone area of Barcelona. Infovia, on the other hand, is a public network that can be accessed from all over Spain and costs the same as a local call.

In either case, students and professors can use analog or digital transmission equipment according to whether they have a modem and access through the Basic Telephone Network (XTB-Xarxa Telefónica Bàsica), with a maximum transmission rate of 28.8 Kbps, or they are linked to the Integrated Services Digital Network (ISDN), which offer them two channels of 64 Kbps each.

The UOC has agreed with Telefónica on a connection charge and a monthly fee for the Integrated Services Digital Network that includes an important discount for students and professors in the hope that students will contract the basic ISDN access, since this triples transmission speed in comparison to modems, the link quality is better, and connection time is minimised. Following the recommendations of the UOC, it is estimated that up to one third of students and professors will be using one of these accesses during the upcoming academic year.

The UOC offers its students a computer help service, to which they can go to help solve all the doubts they may have concerning their computer equipment and programmes. This service can be accessed by means of the Virtual Campus or by telephone.

#### The Virtual Library

The library of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, like any university library, provides support materials for the study, teaching and research carried out within the institution. However, what differentiates the UOC library from other university libraries is the fact that it is virtual. The user can access it through the Virtual Campus. The library is open to its users at all hours, and not only provides them with information in traditional print media but also, and what is becoming increasingly common, in new media (audio, video, etc.) as well as via the Internet.

In addition to the library resources that are situated at the support centres, the UOC library offers access (on-line, through inter-library loan, etc.) to all the information recorded and stored anywhere in the world. For that reason, the library of the University can be defined as a 'library without walls'.

## Services Offered:

Consultation of the UOC data base  
Access to the data base of abstracts taken from UOC journals  
Loan of UOC documents for home use  
Connection to the General Catalogue of the Universities of Catalonia  
Connection to the catalogues of other Catalan universities.  
Inter-library loan  
Access to outside data bases and electronic documents via the Internet

## The Regional Network

In order to ensure that students receive the most personalised attention possible, the UOC has developed a network of support centres extending throughout Catalonia. The centres, which can also be considered *service and resource* centres, are a result of the University's desire to make itself accessible to all of Catalonia. This network brings the University closer to local institutions and society in general. It also facilitates the gathering and arrival of suggestions, requests and needs of all those involved with the UOC.

*In the support centres students have at their disposal the space, equipment and materials that are necessary to make their work and the gathering of information easier.*

At the support centres, which are also UOC information points, students can carry out administrative steps and academic procedures. They can also meet with other students to work in groups or exchange experiences. The centres have a conference room equipped with videoconference, and a media room giving them access to all of the educational, multimedia, and consultation material from the University. In these centres there is also all the computer equipment necessary to connect to and work with the Virtual Campus.

The personal attention and individual treatment that the support centres offer contribute to reinforce the UOC's way of doing and being.

## Quality Assessment

### Goals

The underlying principle of the public sector is to provide its citizens with services. Over the past few years the demands of citizens have increased, forcing the quality level of these services to increase as well. Universities, as public-service institutions with a specific social function, cannot be left out of this process and have to take part in a process of permanent assessment.

This assessment is intimately bound to the maturity that an institution acquires, forming part of the very institution. It is also an indicator that marks the degree of responsibility that has been attained.

Demands for better quality in an environment of limited resources forces universities to define objectives, to fix priorities, to clearly communicate results, and to assess to what degree their services are considered satisfactory.

### Main Conclusions

To assess the quality of the UOC three different, yet complementary, sources and procedures have been used:

1. Statistical data:
  - student body profile
  - work load
  - use of the Virtual Campus
  - academic results
  - etc.
2. A student survey on:
  - the educational process and teaching staff
  - educational materials
  - the Virtual Campus
  - academic management
  - university services
3. A report from an outside agency (a qualitative study, through a series of meetings, undertaken by an independent company not connected to the University) with the following characteristics:
  - sample groups - students, tutors and counsellors
  - technique - group dynamics
  - sample - five groups and three micro-groups (individuals chosen by segmentation and at random)

Nine out of ten students from the pilot programme make a positive or very positive global assessment of the University: their initial expectations have been met, and they value the human relationships

that have been established. Three out of four consider academic demand at the UOC to be high or very high and perceive the figure of the counsellor to be very important in a distance university. With regard to some aspects that students consider in need of improvement, they commented on the design of some of the educational materials, some aspects concerning the role of the counsellors and tutors, and the process of continuous assessment.

The quality assessment process has been carried out based on statistical data (enrolled credits, use of the Virtual Campus, etc.), a student survey and a report from an outside company that interviewed groups of students and professors. With this process the UOC has begun an entire programme of permanent quality assessment in all aspects of what it educationally offers: operation, methodology, educational materials, the Virtual Campus, teaching staff, university services, etc.

As fruit of this assessment, it has been decided, in addition to other things, to revise and improve some of the educational material, improve the Virtual Campus for the upcoming academic year, and to better adapt the work load to the number of credits in which the students enrol. UOC students report that they dedicate on average fifteen hours a week to their studies. In the first examinations 60% of students enrolled passed, which represents 80% of the students who took examinations.

The Virtual Campus is valued as an essential tool, an extremely effective means of communication that is basic in giving the necessary support in distance education. The students also emphasised that the interface is easy to install, learn and use. Three out of four globally assess the Campus as good or very good. With regard to aspects that need to be improved, the students have mentioned the need to study in more depth the academic use of the resources offered by the Internet, to increase the amount of voluntary on-campus computer training at the beginning of the year, and to establish methodological criteria and guide lines for the debates that are part of each subject.

With regard to the Virtual Campus, students have connected to the Campus an average of fifteen minutes a day throughout the first semester, sent an e-mail message every two days, and received messages five times a month. The counsellors and tutors have connected to the Campus an average of two times a day, five minutes each time, sent at least two messages a day, and received more than three a day. Throughout the first six months of operation, more than 125,000 e-mail messages have circulated.

## Current Projects

### The Service Co-operative

The Fundació per a la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya is promoting the establishment of a consumer co-operative that will offer products and services of interest to the students, the teaching staff and the management personnel related to the activity of the FUOC.

The co-operative was set up with the Virtual Campus in mind. This characteristic makes way for a co-operative experience of great potential since it puts at the co-operative's service an exceptional tool for communication and participation.

Initially, the products the co-operative has to offer are those which are most directly related to distance education:

- computer products
- all types of printed books, CD-ROMs, etc.
- some paper and filing supplies.

### EDIUOC

Edicions de la Universitat Oberta de Catalunya SL

EDIUOC was founded through the initiative of the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and its goal is to contribute to the circulation of university-level material in Catalan.

Thus, EDIUOC will promote the publication of the materials created by the UOC, in which the best specialists in their respective subject areas have collaborated, in order to make them available to the university community and the public in general.

### The UOC-Telefónica Joint Company

Throughout the process of creating and developing the modern information and communications technologies that are essential to the operation of the UOC, the University has enjoyed the support and collaboration of Grupo Telefónica. This support was mainly in the fundamental field of communications and, above all, in relation to the development and application of the Infovia service.

In view of our success, various public administrations, companies and institutions have taken an interest in this experience and in the possibility of adapting it (completely or in modules) to meet their own needs in the field of distance education and training.

Once we were aware of this and had studied its feasibility as a business opportunity, the UOC and Grupo Telefónica agreed to create a strategic business unit by setting up a joint company for the purpose of identifying, supporting and promoting the spread of distance learning and virtual communications all over the world through the sale, rental, franchising, assessment, consulting, maintenance and updating of all types of products, services and know-how related to the creation of distance learning centres, as well as the extension of the techniques and media of distance education and virtual communications to the conventional training centres of public administrations, organisations, entities, and public and private companies of all kinds.

### **Continuing Education and Open Programmes**

Today our environment is changing dramatically, and it is doing so at high speed. This is the consequence of a number of different factors, including:

- the fast pace of technological innovation
- the globalisation of markets and the economy
- the vast increase in the supply of products and ... services
- the shorter life cycle of products

The outcome of all this is the dawn of an era in which information and know-how are fundamental in adapting to new situations. In fact, today a considerable amount of effort must be invested in continuing education in order to cope with these constant changes. This effort allows businesses and institutions to become more market-oriented and enables individuals to maintain their status as employees.

True to its spirit, the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya is also prepared to offer continuous training in companies and institutions and to professionals in general, in order to facilitate their adaptation to external change.

Thus, once the first courses of study are well established, the UOC plans to begin its continuous training activities, which will also be designed on the distance model and will utilise the information technologies of distance university education. The university has had to bring forward the launching of these training activities due to the countless requests we have received from the citizens of Catalonia.

The UOC will carry on its activities in continuing education in the areas of:

Continuing University Education  
Training in Companies  
Open Education

It must be said that the UOC has the will and commitment to offer these new activities with the best quality and the highest level of innovation possible in order to bring to the people of Catalonia the chance for professional development in our country.