

Universitat Rovira i Virgili

Investiture as doctor honoris causa  
of Mr Xavier Prats Monné

Special academic session,  
8 February 2019





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Universitat Rovira i Virgili  
Tarragona

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📖 Encomium of the candidate  
by Doctor Francesc Xavier Grau







Rector, Authorities, Doctors, administration and service staff, students, members of the academic community, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a source of great satisfaction for me to share with all of you this encomium on the occasion of the investiture of Mr Xavier Prats Monné as a doctor honoris causa by the Universitat Rovira i Virgili. I would like to congratulate Rector Ferré for deciding to nominate him and the Governing Council for their unanimous decision to award Mr Prats the university's highest distinction. Likewise I would like to thank Rector Ferré and Rector Figueras for having thought of me to act as sponsor. I regard it as both a great honour and a whole new experience. Indeed, I have had the privilege to take part in many of the honorary degree ceremonies organized by my university as a member of the audience or as chairman but never, until today, have I had to accompany and introduce the candidate.

In this encomium, over the next quarter of an hour, I am expected to introduce Mr Xavier Prats Monné and appraise the achievements for which the Universitat Rovira i Virgili has decided to award him the solemn distinction of an honorary degree.

Despite being practically a contemporary of his, I have only had the pleasure of meeting Xavier Prats and working with him relatively recently, when my duties as the rector of this university put me in touch with various directorate generals of the European Commission. And I must say that one of the most fruitful relationships was with Xavier Prats, initially as deputy director general of Education and Culture of the European Union and the representative of the European Union at the European Institute of Technology, the organisation responsible for the KIC programme (Knowledge and Innovation Communities). As a result of this relationship, Xavier Prats has helped the university with his advice and information on several visits and in workshops in which he has always generously taken part.

Therefore, it is my honour and privilege to pronounce the encomium of the candidate. I am delighted to have been chosen for this task in a personal capacity and as a member of this particular university community

and the whole Catalan university system because, as I have said, I sincerely believe that the URV has made a very sensible decision in awarding this honorary degree to Dr Prats and bringing him into the University Senate for his achievements. In his case his achievements are not so much academic and scientific; rather he has served society through his professional activity to the benefit of education, culture and public services.

Born in Tarragona in 1956, Xavier Prats Monné finished his primary and secondary education in Rome where his father Xavier Prats Llaurodó worked as a specialist in forests for the United Nations Association for Food and Culture, and he graduated in Social Anthropology at the Complutense University in Madrid. He specialised in Economics and Cooperation for Development in the Centre International des Hautes Études Méditerranéennes de Paris (Diplôme d'Études Approfondies) and he finished his education with a qualification in European Studies at the College of Europe in Bruges (Belgium), where he graduated first in the class of Johan Willem Beyen (at the College of Europe in Bruges, every academic year is named after a European personality). It was there that he had his first academic experience as an adjunct lecturer. As we can see, his *alma mater* is spread throughout Europe. However, Mr Prats is better known for the more than three decades he worked as an international civil servant at the European Commission.

- He was deputy director of the Office of the Vice-President of International Relations, Manuel Marín, advisor to the Commissioner for Regional Policy Michel Barnier, and deputy spokesperson for President Jacques Delors. This experience during one of the golden periods of the Commission reinforced his loyalty to the institution.
- From 2007 to 2010, he was director for Employment Policy and one of the five founding members of the Impact Assessment Board, which reports directly to the president of the European Commission.
- Between 2011 and 2015 he was deputy director general and then director general of Education and Culture of the European Commission.
- From September 2015 to September 2018 he was director general of Health and Food Safety of the European Commission, during which time he was responsible for the European Union's policies and programmes on matters of health and food safety, including the promotion of public health, the assessment of national healthcare systems, the legislation of the pharmaceutical industry, animal health and welfare, and the strengthening of Europe's capacity to deal with crisis situations in human

health and food safety. He also represented the European Commission on the Governing Board of the European Medicines Agency and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control.

For this wide-ranging experience he has been awarded the Civil Order of Alfonso X, the Wise, in recognition of his achievements in education, science, culture, higher education and research, which are the very same achievements that are the reason for this encomium. As deputy director general, first, and then as director general of Education and Culture he was responsible for the regulations governing education and culture in the European Union, and such major programmes for universities as Erasmus, Marie Curie and Creative Europe, all of which have undergone considerable growth and had great impact all over Europe, with Catalonia being no exception.

At the beginning of this academic year – October 2018 – he was appointed special advisor for Teach For All, a global non-profit organisation whose mission is to extend educational opportunities all over the world. Teach For All already exists in 48 countries in the 6 continents, has already reached out to 10 million young people and is growing rapidly. In Spain the project goes by the name “Empieza por Educar”, Mr Prats is a member of the board and in Catalonia it has the support of the Secretariat for Universities and Research, which I am now responsible for.

Throughout his professional career, and now in his work for Teach for All, Xavier Prats has shown constant concern and commitment for public service, particularly education, but also culture and health, all of which are fundamental to a society based on the concept of public welfare. It is while he was defending and promoting the public services, and particularly education, that Xavier Prats and I met each other.

I have had numerous opportunities to express my opinion in this very hall so you all know that I believe that higher education and research in all areas of knowledge are the pillars that make the welfare state sustainable. Hence, they are essentially a public responsibility. The extent of this responsibility is a topic of permanent debate, particularly because the meagre public resources are always subject to many more claims than they are capable of satisfying. In any case, for me, the Government must take full responsibility for ensuring that both higher education and research cover all spheres of knowledge and can be accessed by all social classes. This line of thought and the need to ensure that the knowledge system is sufficient for the country's needs is what has prompted me, in the exercise of my new responsibilities, to propose to

Àngels Chacón a National Pact for the Knowledge Society. She has managed to turn this proposal into a Governmental Agreement and, in a short while, work will begin.

Whatever the case may be, there needs to be a commitment to education and education needs to be regarded as a public asset. I am sure that these concepts will be present in the speech that Mr Prats is about to make, as they have been throughout his professional career, and as they have been – and still have to be – at the very base of European construction. The Erasmus programmes, the European research funding framework programmes, the European Higher Education Area, the European Institute of Technology and so many other programmes and initiatives in which Xavier Prats has been involved, are all good examples of the building blocks of a real European Union. In short, he works tirelessly for the construction of Europe. And among all the things he has done, of particular note is his work as a designer, architect and builder to develop what was already a major tool for student mobility, Erasmus, into the global and strategic programme that is now Erasmus+. And he is perfectly entitled to feel satisfied that in the negotiation for the period 2021-27 the main countries and actors have not wanted to change either the structure or the main lines that he spent so much time laying down as leader of the negotiations seven years ago. Fortunately for all of us, Europe is still being constructed.

Europe, the world, Spain and Catalonia ... all societies are living through times of some agitation and confusion in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Times are by no means easy and, for this reason, we need the constructive spirit of more and more people like Xavier Prats. We do not need people seeking facile solutions who spend their time focusing on the stains on the wall and suggesting that it should be knocked down, with no respect for the work already done. All over Europe, the world, Spain and Catalonia we need people with the constructive spirit of Xavier Prats who are aware of their responsibility and know how to drive societies, institutions, university systems, universities and departments forward by using all that is good that is inevitably part of the work done by their predecessors.

Particularly in the sphere of knowledge, modesty needs to prevail and it is worthwhile bearing in mind the words of the scientist who has perhaps had the greatest impact and influence on history. In a letter to Robert Hooke, Isaac Newton said, “Bernard de Chartres used to say that we [the moderns] are like dwarves perched on the shoulders of giants [the Ancients] and thus

we are able to see more and farther than the latter. And this is not at all because of the acuteness of our sight or the stature of our body, but because we are carried aloft and elevated by the magnitude of the giants.” This sentence has a more popular, shorter version: “If I have seen further it is only by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

I am quite sure that times have never been simple but this is particularly true of the times we are living in at the present. Globalisation, the explosion of the data and information sciences, and the biosciences are posing enormous challenges to society. In his latest book, Yuval Noah Harari says the following about the enormous possibilities, but also the dangers, of the advances in bioengineering, robotics and artificial intelligence in a future that is not too distant: “Many people might share the fate not of nineteenth-century wagon drivers – who switched to driving taxis – but of nineteenth-century horses, who were increasingly pushed out of the job market altogether.” I am sure that the speculation is deliberately provocative and exaggerated. Even so, in the face of the incredible progress that is being made in the field of the new technologies, and all the possibilities that are emerging, we humans, the general public, must be able to keep on top of the situation and control our own evolution and development. And this will only be possible if we can provide more and better education. If we are to respond to the challenge, we need to be able to count on all the talent available, not only for social justice but also for social efficacy and efficiency. This brings me back to Xavier Prats, who believes education to be fundamental to preserving the essential values of a democratic society. And I make a connection between this idea and the one clearly expressed by Luc Weber and Sjur Bergan, in the book published in 2005 by the Council of Europe *The Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research*, in which they describe their concern for one of the core features of European society: equal access to higher education, based exclusively on achievement, and the considerable trust placed in the public institutions to provide this education and to carry out basic research.

In most of Europe, I believe that this objective has practically been achieved, at least on a cultural level, although the re-emergence of extreme right-wing political positions, which question intra- and extra-European solidarity, is putting at risk not only the progress that has been made in recent decades but also the very values that have been making Europe the model and the hope for the world.

So today, here at my university, I would like to stress the need for greater public effort to ensure that higher education is made available to all. We are committed to this goal, which will become a reality as soon as its political representatives provide the country with a budgetary framework in accordance with the times.

I would like to finish my encomium by saying once again how grateful I am for having been able to sponsor Xavier Prats Monné.

“Rector of the URV, insofar as I have been able, I have given an account of the life and work of Xavier Prats Monné. I believe that I have said enough for you to authorise that his achievements be given official recognition. Therefore, I ask you to confer an honorary degree on Xavier Prats Monné so that he may become a member of our university.”











 Honorary degree acceptance speech  
by Mr Xavier Prats Monné



Rectora Magnífica, distinguished guests, friends,

Allow me to start by telling you how grateful I am to the URV community, and how humbled by this distinction.

Tarragona has many reasons to be proud of itself. Of its friendly shores and mellow climate, for instance, which only someone who has spent thirty years under the cloudy skies of Brussels can fully appreciate.

Of its past, too. As I spent most of my formative years in Rome, I had no choice but to learn about Roman history. So among the childhood memories that come to my mind whenever I think of Tarragona, there are no sad moments or rainy days: only summertime, *caga tió* and Roman emperors.

It seems that Augustus, a man not known for his modesty, said this about Rome: “I found a city of bricks and left a city of marble” [*marmoream relinquo, quam latericiam accepi*]. You just need to stroll from this hill down to the amphitheatre to realise that Augustus could have said the same about Tarragona for the way his presence transformed it into a majestic city.

But the best resource of any province – Roman or Catalan – is not its climate or its past: it is its talent and its future. And talent and future is what the URV stands for.

In less than thirty years this young university has become a symbol of excellence: an innovative institution competing successfully in Europe and globally yet connected to its region and engaged with society in the promotion of knowledge and human capital.

I am therefore deeply honoured to join the URV community today. I don't know whether I have done enough to receive this distinction, but I promise to do my best to deserve it.

My only regret is that my parents are not with us any more. My father would have been proud of his son; my mother would have believed every word of Dr Grau's generous *laudatio*.

## **A new purpose for education**

Since you are here, trapped with no choice but to listen, I would like to make a few comments on a topic close to my heart: education and its significance for Europe's future.

We Europeans have been discussing education at least since Plato wrote the Socratic dialogues almost twenty-five centuries ago. We still have a variety of viewpoints on the reasons for acquiring knowledge and skills and the ways to do so, but I think we will all agree that, for most of human history, the purpose of education has been to make men better people.

I do mean "men", by the way, since it is only in modern times that women have been considered worthy of an education.

The first evidence of teaching at the University of Oxford can be traced back to the year 1096; in 1956, 860 years later, the faculty of the university still insisted on limiting the number of female students to less than 25% of the total.

And even today the best proof of the transformational power of education is the fear that the empowerment of women still inspires in the mind of authoritarian governments and organised religions.

But still: modern European civilisation was built on belief in the empowerment of the individual through knowledge, and the driving force behind such personal improvement was education. "Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire", as W.B. Yeats defined it.

And today we have come to realise another very important thing about education: that its benefits go beyond the individual, as new ideas create economic growth and prosperity.

And I believe that, for us Europeans, education has an even more urgent purpose: more than ever before, it is the upholder of intellectual freedom and democracy.

## **Europe's pessimism**

Helmut Köhl, borrowing from Bismarck I think, once said that the European project is like a sausage: it's very good, but you'd rather not know how it's made. I have witnessed the making of the sausage for thirty years, and I have never been as convinced as now of the frailty of European integration - but also of its importance.

The European ideal to which I have devoted most of my professional life is a very simple one: a society based on rational informed choice, in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.

These values are the foundation of the European Union. With the end of the Cold War, we thought we could take them for granted. Not any more: they are challenged on our doorsteps and increasingly at home, here in Europe, by new forms of populism and by illiberal authoritarian regimes. And by new versions of the same old nationalisms.

There is nothing new in the arguments of nationalism since Fichte proposed, two centuries ago, that education should be the vehicle to promote Germany's national culture and language, and to raise its pride after humiliation at the hands of France.

We know what kind of totalitarian ideology Fichte's well-meaning romantic idealism inspired. Two World Wars and 120 million dead should have taught us that, in Samuel Johnson's words, "patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrels" and that the liberty of the citizen is far more important than the identity of the nation. The European Union was born as a result of these lessons from history – but history also tells us that nothing is learned forever, and that man is the only animal that trips on the same stone twice.

These are uncertain times; it is understandable that many European citizens feel apprehensive about the present, pessimistic about the future, and distrustful of public institutions. We see this anxiety every day, in the media, and in surveys and cultural expression.

Europe's pessimism can be explained in part by the lasting impact of the economic crisis, the rise of inequality, and the realisation that the world is drifting in ways we don't understand or control. But this sense of anxiety, our lack of confidence in our own future, sets Europe apart from other regions in the world.

Most countries are more deeply unequal, and most people have weaker social protection than Europe, and yet their civil societies and institutions seem more confident about their personal and collective future than we are.

Education is no exception: we Europeans seem to have lost faith in knowledge and in the transformational power of education.

It's not that people do not want to get a degree; it's that having a degree has become an end in itself - a signal to future employers and a source of social respectability – rather than a means to becoming a better person.

It's not that governments don't produce new education laws because sometimes it seems that's all they do. It's that a law is not an end or a compromise between vested interests. There is not enough concern about the victims of education (the students) or its architects (the teachers).

In the meantime, many countries that find themselves where Europe was a few decades ago believe in education and research more than ever. The global trends are telling. In emerging economies, individuals as well as public and private institutions are boosting their investment in education and research, leading to a massive expansion of student enrolment and to higher levels of research. Brazil, Chile, South Africa and Korea devote a far higher proportion of their GDP to education than almost any EU country.

It's true that money is not everything in education. You can spend the same amount on education and the outcomes can be radically different. Many improvements require only political will or regulatory changes (more flexibility and autonomy for universities, for example). And it's very difficult to measure and transfer education outcomes. But as they say: if you think education is expensive, try ignorance.

### **A better future is possible**

To overcome this Euro-pessimism and be confident that there is a better future, we need to bear in mind what Europe has achieved in its recent past.

Western Europe's economic reconstruction of the post-war period was based not on natural resources but on immaterial wealth: people, their talent, and their attitude to personal development.

Or take women's rights. As we celebrate this year the 150th anniversary of John Stuart Mill's *"The Subjection of Women"* and the 70th of Simone de Beauvoir's *"Le deuxième sexe"*, it is worth remembering that gender equality is an essentially European value. At the beginning of the 20th century, 75% of Spanish women were illiterate. A century later, 75% of the students of medicine in Spain are women. Discrimination and inequality are still a daily experience for millions of women, and the MeToo movement has brought the pervasiveness of abuse to the surface.

But the daunting task ahead should not hide the fact that women have made extraordinary progress, and that the European Union is the champion of the global movement for women's sexual and reproductive health and rights.

Likewise, saying that education can transform Europe's society is not wishful thinking. It has already happened. Although it seems to have faded



away in our collective memory, over the last fifty years, Europe's education systems have made extraordinary progress.

In fifty years, the proportion of people with at least an upper secondary education in the EU has doubled to above 80%. And the proportion of Europeans with a university degree has risen from under 15%, mostly males, to almost 40% with a slight majority of females.

This radical transformation was possible thanks to changing social values, the emancipation of women, and the simple, compelling idea that creating educated people is the path to a better society. It can be done again.

So, education can and must have a great future, if only because the demand for new knowledge and new skills will increase. And because critical thinking is the prerequisite of a democratic society.

But it will not be education as we know it.

I cannot think of any country in the world that is not trying to reform its education system. Why? Because it is not enough to do more of what we did yesterday: we must do it differently. Because our societies have never been like they are now. And because what we are doing today is not what young people will need tomorrow.

We are witnessing dramatic changes in the global education landscape, in the global distribution of talent, in the business models of education institutions, in the delivery and certification of skills, in the ways people teach and learn, and in the expectations of students, who are increasingly aware of the importance of learning and yet uncertain as to the relevance of what they learn for their future lives.

These changes will continue. The number of 25- to 34-year-old graduates in China will rise by 300% by 2030, and by 30% in Europe and the United States, for example. Most importantly in my view, both teaching and learning will have to be far more collaborative and far more inter-disciplinary than it is today.

Students of all types of education need to understand and combine science, the humanities and the arts. Because while science and technology have a big role to play in our societies and economies, so do the social sciences in coping with diversity and inequality, and the arts and humanities in developing creative products and services to meet new unimagined demands.

We have more information than ever, yet knowledge changes so fast that we know very little about how the world will look when the URV

celebrates its 50th anniversary. So the last thing students need today from their teacher or tenured professor is more information: they already have too much. What they need is the ability to combine different information into strategic thinking, to understand other cultures and disciplines, to distinguish the important from the ephemeral, to be resilient and adapt to permanent change.

If education needs to change, can technology help? This has been the subject of heated discussions since Thomas Edison predicted in 1913 that, in ten years, schools would no longer need books, just a cinema.

Until recently, there was a lot of talk but little evidence about the impact of technology on education. Many are still sceptical: after all, if Socrates or Augustus came to visit a URV campus today, one of the few things they would recognise immediately is a classroom. Their only surprise would be to see that women are learning and teaching. If the basic principles and tools of education have survived through the ages, why shouldn't they survive the 21st century too?

Yet this time it's different, I think. The tsunami of technology is about to disrupt education as it has already disrupted other sectors.

The world's e-learning market has already created completely new services and audiences: off-campus international learners, modular courses rather than complete programmes, broader student age ranges. More importantly, the combination of artificial intelligence and big data are bringing aspects of education to the surface that have so far eluded analytical scrutiny, such as personal learning pathways.

On the other hand, technology brings unprecedented risks, not just for privacy but also for the risk of determinism. Since technologies forget nothing, learners could be bound by their own past, or could be denied from an early age the recognition of their ability to improve; and they could be limited in their own choice and freedom to learn by institutions playing with statistics and predictive algorithms.

The challenge is not to improve education but to change the way we educate, so that we can remain masters of our own future.

### **A bolder agenda for Europe's universities**

Our societies will have to address complex challenges that do not lend themselves to simplistic solutions. As Yuval Noah Harari put it, for the last

two thousand years philosophy, religion and science have been telling us that the most important thing in life is to know oneself. Yet very soon an algorithm will know us better than we know ourselves, and biotechnology will give us the capacity to reshape life. Whether we like it or not, we are now being forced to rethink what it means to be human.

The only way we will meet these challenges is through a far stronger role for knowledge, science and the humanities.

Think about this paradox: just as science and technology advance with giant steps, so does scepticism about science. We know that vaccination is the most effective public health instrument in human history. We know that homeopathy is to medicine what astrology is to astronomy: the product of ignorance and fear. And yet trust in vaccines is decreasing, and homeopathic products pushed by a few unscrupulous multinationals are trusted by many as a natural alternative to scientifically sound medicine.

We need more decisions informed by reasoned debate, based on evidence. All opinions are legitimate, but not all opinions are equal. People should be free to think and say that the Earth is flat. But if they do, they must be told in no uncertain terms that they are wrong.

This is why I believe the voice of universities in the public debate must be louder and bolder.

We Europeans have invented many things. Not all of them good: total war and the Holocaust are pure European legacies. But we can claim one genuine, important, positive contribution to humanity: the University, a truly European invention that made us what we are and which deserves a far more prominent role.

Since the creation of Humboldt University in 1810, the greatest ambition of any university is excellence, as judged by academic peers. This remains as important as ever. But in these uncertain times of change, we must aim for Europe's universities to have a greater impact on society. Why offer just a degree, when what citizens need is a lifetime subscription that grants them access to the knowledge produced by higher education institutions?

I realise that this may sound unrealistic, even unfair, in these times of budget constraints and the bureaucratisation of academic life, especially for the governance model in Southern Europe.

I hear that most days, when the gates of the URV open at dawn, the Rector is already waiting on the doorstep. And that more often than not she is the one who turns off the light in the evening. And, apparently, a few years

ago she was not allowed to attend her faculty meeting because she was on maternity leave. One can't ask for more dedication from individuals, or more bureaucracy from institutions.

As most people in this room know better than me, universities today face many challenges: they are complex, vertically organised by departments and disciplines, and yet they operate in an increasingly flat and networked ecosystem. They are losing the monopoly on the transmission and certification of knowledge.

At the same time, universities are expected to do ever more with less: meet higher expectations for accountability and performance; fulfil more bureaucratic requirements; compete against other claims for limited public funding; and find an elusive balance between research-intensive activities and quality of teaching.

And all education institutions are increasingly under pressure from students, who demand change and improvement in content and delivery mode.

As more and more people acquire a university degree, questions arise about cost and added value, and about alternatives to the university as we know it. If today, in an improbable gesture of solidarity, the citizens of Tarragona decided to cancel the student debt of the United States of America, each of us would have to disburse 15 million dollars; this will not happen – and there are many sustainable alternatives around.

We know what universities require to be able to play their role in full: more autonomy to define their strategies, fewer administrative constraints, and more funding to achieve impact. And in exchange, they would need to provide more transparency and accountability.

Easier said than done; and not something universities can decide on their own. But this can be, I think, the ambition of a young institution such as the URV, which can be confident about its future and proud of its achievements without being encumbered by the weight of tradition. This is also what European societies need today. It is an agenda worth fighting for.

As Amin Maalouf said here, in his own *honoris causa* address in 2006, the success or the failure of the European project will determine whether human adventure will find the path of progress. And we can all, with our words and actions, as fellow Europeans, make a difference.

Today I am joining the privileged club of URV doctors *honoris causa*. Some of them bring affectionate personal memories: Josep Anton

Baixeras was a dear friend of my parents. Others are eminent international personalities: Chomsky, Maalouf, Sen, Tàpies.

They are all distinguished. They are artisans, stonemasons patiently trying to construct a world we can be proud to inhabit. It is honourable work, and I am deeply honoured that you have chosen to recognise mine.

Almost all of them, though, are also male. So I am keenly aware that today, just by receiving this distinction, I have already made a contribution to the URV community. Unfortunately, it is a negative one: I am increasing the under-representation of women.

I will take this as another incentive to deserve the distinction that you, the members of the URV community, have so generously granted me.

My consolation is that I am aware of the great work being done by the Equality Observatory of the URV led by Dr Inma Pastor. And I am also aware that the Rector herself is personally committed to ensuring that the URV bestows this great honour on outstanding women, who will not be just honorary degree holders but also defenders of the cause of equality and role models for the young women of today and tomorrow.

It is too late for the URV to acknowledge the heroism of Maria Helena Maseras, the first *tarragonina* and Spanish woman to study Medicine 150 years ago but who was never allowed to practise. If she could see a Medicine classroom today where three out of four students are women, she would probably feel vindicated.

But there are many other unsung heroes, and the road to equality is long.

Thank you for your patience.





Welcome speech

by Doctor María José Figueras,  
rector of the URV





Dr Xavier Prats, President of the Board of Trustees, General Secretary of the URV, Dr Francesc Xavier Grau, Former rectors, Representatives from politics and society, Colleagues from other universities, Members of the university community, Ladies and gentlemen...

Welcome to the Universitat Rovira i Virgili.

As you know I took up the position of rector last June, eight months ago now, and this is the first time I have had the opportunity to preside over the investiture of a doctor honoris causa at our university: Dr Xavier Prats Monné.

He was nominated as a candidate for the highest distinction a university can award a person for their achievements and career by my predecessor Josep Anton Ferré.

And as we have just heard from another of my predecessors – now Secretary for Universities and Research of the Catalan Government, Dr Francesc Xavier Grau – the nomination is well deserved. And, if you will allow me to say so, justice is being done.

Institutions often tend to give greater value to people from abroad even though the achievements and careers of locals are similar or superior.

Of course, this is not exclusive to Tarragona; it happens everywhere and is the origin of the expression “Nobody is a prophet in their own land”, which I am sure you have heard more than once in a variety of situations.

This is why I say that the award of an honorary degree to Xavier Prats is not only well deserved; it is also an act of justice.

Xavier Prats is a major figure for many reasons. He is one of the highest ranking civil servants of the European Commission to come from our country, at the head of major projects such as the Erasmus, Marie Curie and Creative Europe programmes. And today he is a consultant for Teach for All, one of the biggest and most prestigious non-profit organizations working for new educational opportunities around the world. To date, the organization has helped 10 million young people from 48 countries in 6 continents and its sphere of influence is constantly on the increase. Its founder and director

general, Wendy Kopp, has been distinguished by the magazine *Time* as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

And it is precisely for his professional career, and the social commitment and vocation for public service that Xavier Prats has shown in the various fields in which he has had responsibility – for example, education, science, culture, and food and health – that today the Universitat Rovira i Virgili awards him an honorary degree. And, in so doing, we make him a prophet in his own land.

So, Doctor Prats becomes another name on the list of other local honorary degree holders. From Tarragona come the radiologist Lluís Delclòs; the doctor and researcher Àngel Carlos Pellicer; the lawyer Josep Antoni Baixeras; the historian and former mayor of Tarragona Josep Maria Recasens. From Reus come the economist and researcher Jaume Gil Aluja; the writer Xavier Amorós; and the doctor and researcher Ramon Gomis. And from Riudoms and Tortosa come the musician and composer Joan Guinjoan and the teacher, journalist and political activist Josep Subirats Piñana, respectively.

All of the above have been awarded the highest distinction that our institution can give. Of the 43 holders of honorary degrees, 10 are from the local region.

In the last few weeks I have had the chance to catch up with the Doctor Prats who I once knew.

I must confess, however, that the impression I had of him has been reinforced not only by the testimony of mutual friends and Doctor Grau's encomium, but also by the candidate's own acceptance speech, with which I agree in its entirety.

As well as being an avid reader – as we were told by his wife – Xavier Prats is a convinced pro-European at a time that there are many doubts about the role the European Commission is playing and must continue to play in the countries that are members of the Union and in the world in general. His brilliant career has made him a reference in several fields, including all levels of education, and particularly the university.

Above all, however, Doctor Prats is a man of deep-seated values and strong social commitment, which has been made clear by his description of his European ideal: "a society based on pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between men and women."

One of the main objectives of the education system, from primary school to university, must be to educate People, with a capital P, to acquire

competencies, skills and knowledge rooted in values such as tolerance, justice, cooperation, solidarity and equality. These People will end up working for the benefit of society and make the world a better place.

Today, Xavier Prats has expressed this in the following terms: “For most of the history of humanity, the aim of education has been to make man better.”

I also agree with him that we Europeans seem to have lost our faith in knowledge and the transforming power of education. Only those countries and societies that firmly believe in the need to commit to improving education and the knowledge society at all levels with action and not just words – that is to say, by reverting the current public and private investment policies – will make their societies better and more just.

It is clear to the URV that this is the direction we need to move in and, for this reason, we have initiated a series of policies and projects that should permit us to make significant progress towards an institution that is more egalitarian, more cooperative, more just, more inclusive and more transparent. In short, more in tune with the times.

This is the future that we want for our University. However, if this future is to arrive, as well as our determination and effort, we need the complicity of our governments. And, if you allow me to say so, this is something we do not always have.

Our duty is to provide courses that are of better quality, more cooperative, more interdisciplinary and which effectively combine the sciences the humanities and the arts.

It is also our duty to lead the changes being imposed by the revolution of the new technologies and adapt our degree course to the new times, make the necessary changes to improve the transmission of knowledge and act as the driving force of society in areas such as innovation, in which we have to be more competitive. At the same time, however, it is up to the governments to provide universities with funding that is more in accordance with the real needs of academic institutions and give us greater autonomy so that we can define our own strategies.

And finally, I would like to thank our new doctor honoris causa for his constant references to the role of women in the new society and the university, and the need to make gender equality normal at all levels, particularly in management and positions of responsibility.

In the Executive Council meeting yesterday, Doctor Prats told us that the struggle for real and effective gender equality should not be left exclusively to women. We all have to get involved: men and women.

As many of you know, this is one of the main objectives of the new management team (which has the same number of men and women, by the way), which it is my honour to preside: to make equality policies we have proposed a reality. And we shall persist until equality is fully effective.

And Doctor Prats is absolutely right. There are many worthy women who must be admired for their academic, social and human qualities. In this respect, I would like to thank our community for responding to what I said at the beginning of the academic year and putting forward the names of several exceptional women as future candidates for honorary degrees in an attempt to redress the gender balance in the academic award.

We are very grateful, Xavier, that you have accepted this honorary degree. For the Universitat Rovira i Virgili it is a great honour to have a new ambassador for our institution, a leading figure in the construction of Europe, education, health and gender equality who enhances the prestige of the wide range of extraordinary personalities who represent the university.

Yesterday we were delighted to hear him say that he wanted to be a doctor honoris causa who was in regular contact with the institution. I am convinced that from this day on the Universitat Rovira i Virgili will be able to count on another great ambassador.

In sincere acknowledgement of your achievements, please accept a warm round of applause from our community which, as from today, is also yours.

Thank you very much.



