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## **Beginning of the Course of the Catalan Universities towards the COVID-19: Evidence versus Negligence**

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## **Abstract**

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There is an extensive literature on the importance of the use of scientific evidence on teaching methods in higher education institutions. However, there is a gap in how evidence is used for decision making that affects students and staff in universities. This article is a contribution to the existing gap, making the analysis of a specific case on how Catalan universities have managed the decision making regarding their staff in the face of the pandemic situation with the COVID-19. In this article, through the interview with managers and faculty from different Catalan universities, it will be shown to what extent these university institutions have opted for decision making in the management of the situation based on scientific evidence or simply compliance with government regulations.

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**Keywords:** Scientific Evidences, higher education, university, COVID-19, Dialogic Public Policy

# **Inicio del Curso de las Universidades Catalanas hacia el Covid-19: la Evidencia frente a la Negligencia**

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## **Resumen**

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Existe una amplia literatura sobre la importancia del uso de la evidencia científica en los métodos de enseñanza en las instituciones de educación superior. Sin embargo, existe un vacío en cuanto a cómo se utiliza la evidencia para la toma de decisiones que afectan a los y las estudiantes y al personal de las universidades. Este artículo es una contribución a la brecha existente, realizando el análisis de un caso concreto sobre cómo las universidades catalanas han gestionado la toma de decisiones sobre su personal ante la situación de pandemia con el COVID-19. En este artículo, a través de la entrevista a directivos y profesorado de diferentes universidades catalanas, se mostrará en qué medida estas instituciones universitarias han optado por una toma de decisiones en la gestión de la situación basada en la evidencia científica o simplemente en el cumplimiento de la normativa gubernamental.

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**Palabras clave:** Evidencias científicas, educación superior, universidad, COVID-19, Política Pública Dialógica

“I simply wish that, in a matter which so closely concerns the wellbeing of the human race, no decision shall be made without all the knowledge which a little analysis and calculation can provide' (Daniel Bernoulli 1760).

With this quotation, the article by Blower and Bernoulli (2004) begins, and so did a conference by the Physicist, full Professor in Computer Science and Mathematics, Àlex Arenas. In this same conference, Arenas affirmed that the measures of containment of the pandemic that Universities had taken without considering the data obtained through research were highly dangerous because they seriously affected society (Arenas 2020 Oct 23).

The COVID19 crisis has seriously affected the world, but in the case of Spain, with one of the best health systems in Europe and occupying the 15th position worldwide in the Global Health Security Index, the data on infection and death are very worrying (García-Basteiro et al., 2020a). Slow decision-making, reflects that the government underestimated the speed at which the virus spread and its serious effects of it. The first case of COVID in the country was on January 31, and the first death was on February 13. This shows that the politicians and even the scientists who advised at the time failed to respond to the alarm, as Horton, editor-in-chief of *The Lancet* (2020, p. 68), pointed out. In a nutshell:

The failures were legion. First, there was a failure of technical advice. Despite possessing some of the world's most talented scientists, nations such as the US, Italy, Spain, France, and the UK were unable to harness their knowledge and skills to deliver timely recommendations to forest all the terrifying human impacts of the pandemic. (p. 83)

Horton (2020) described how the arrival of the virus in Europe overtook many countries. Among them, there is Spain, which decreed the lockdown on March 14th but with a poorly prepared health system and a daily death toll of more than 700 people. Likewise, several investigations have revealed the poor care the elderly who arrived at the hospitals and care homes received (Merodio et al., 2020).

An editorial in *The Lancet* on October 16, 2020 (*The Lancet Public Health* 2020) stated that, while the data on infections and deaths still needed to be fully understood, on the one hand, the health system had

been weakened and, on the other, the complexities of the politics that shape the country had been revealed. In August 2020, a group of Spanish scientists, through a letter to the same magazine, demanded an independent investigation about the response that Spain had given to the COVID-19. At that time, there were more than 300,000 cases, 28,498 confirmed deaths, about 44,000 excess deaths, and more than 50,000 health workers infected (García-Basteiro et al., 2020a). If the confinement had been carried out weeks before March 14, it is estimated that the deaths would have been reduced to 50% or more, as well as the number of people infected (Hernández, 2020). In a press interview, Richard Horton declared that the Spanish government had the information needed to make this decision, and it did not, nor contacted scientists in China who could have provided advice based on their experience (Hernández, 2020).

Spain seems to have been the protagonist of many of The Lancet's editorials where some of the errors in the management of the COVID-19 pandemic are pointed out. One on November 2000 (Trias-Llimós et al., 2020) highlights the need to include disaggregated data in the daily updates, as, since May 19, 2020, they have not been provided. They add that "at the time of writing, age-specific data from the CNE is given only in weekly publications (as Adobe PDF files), without geographic detail or retrospective corrections, and with cumulative counts tabulated only from mid-May onwards. Therefore, properly merging age-specific time series after the first wave is difficult or impossible" (p. 576). It should be noted that other countries, such as the Netherlands, Germany, the Philippines, and Mexico, published comprehensive daily updates of cases and deaths, disaggregated by age, sex, and geographical area. Without these data, it is very difficult to understand the pandemic and to make correct policy decisions. (Trias-Llimós et al., 2020).

The purpose of this paper is to show whether the decision on how to start the academic year in Catalan universities was made based on scientific evidence or not.

### **Dialogic Public Policy vs. the "Experts"**

Although scientific evidence was provided by research in epidemiology, it did not translate into policies that improved the situation caused by the COVID-19 in Spain in an efficient way.

A distorted view of what evidence is has been offered, showing that the interpretation of data and the reading of evidence can be different and, therefore, that there are different interpretations of what needs to be done (Schleiff et al., 2020).

Research has shown that the availability of scientific evidence does not easily translate into policy decisions and that there are very complex relationships between the two sides that make many policies unscientific (Head 2016; Mols et al., 2020; Bogenschneider & Corbett 2011; Sager et al., 2020). In the words of Head (2016), both governments and political leaders are often more motivated by socio-political factors, such as maintaining stakeholder support and engaging in media-framed debates and management risks, than by scientific evidence. This situation poses a problem because, even though there is an honest discussion about the importance of using scientific evidence and huge amounts of money (from both public and private funds) are used in the health field for scientific research, this does not translate directly into policy guidelines (Grimshaw et al. 2021; Masood et al., 2020).

O'Donnell and Nelson (2020) argue that it is necessary to harness the power of the law to protect independence and of the scientific process while making the scientific evidence more transparent. Policy-makers should be offered the best evidence available while being made to understand that their decisions can lead to improving their public acceptance, "particularly where behaviour change is needed. This means that the processes for generating scientific evidence must remain transparent, robust and independent." (p. 675). According to scientific research, when the available evidence is not effectively incorporated into decision-making processes, the legitimacy of the approval of the policy measures decided upon is undermined.

In order to make political decisions with social impact, it is necessary that these are made following a logical conception. This conception is known as dialogic public policies: "as those public policies that emerge

from an equal dialogue between decision makers, end-users and experts, and dialogue is based on the scientific evidence that achieves the best results" (Álvarez et al. 2020).

Based on this conceptualization, the elaboration of effective policies does not only require the participation of scientists, but also, directly or indirectly, the evidence with which they work should be shared and dialogued with the population so that the measures proposed are successfully implemented, both by political decision makers and by the general public (Flecha, 2016). The researcher Álex Arenas stated in this vein that: "I am not looking for them to pay attention to me, but to take everything into consideration and to speak with data and a scientific basis behind it (...) I am not presenting an opinion, but the result of a calculation" (Aguilar, 2020).

Research and recommendations from medical evidence show, along the lines of dialogic public policy, that among the prerequisites for the COVID-19 restrictions to be eased and enforced, the following are necessary for everyone: knowledge of infection status, community engagement, adequate public-health capacity, adequate health-system capacity, and border controls (Han et al., 2020).

In addition, in line with a more effective and dialogic management, 20 epidemiologists and researchers in the field of health suggested, through the journal *The Lancet*, the requirements and principles to carry out effectively and independently the evaluation of how the pandemic had been managed in Spain (García-Basteiro et al., 2020b). In this proposal, besides selecting a panel of experts supported by a scientific team in charge of collecting and analyzing the evidence, it was proposed to include working groups formed by relevant scientific societies, other professionals, and civil society, offering them specialized scientific evidence in the field.

Qoronfleh (2020) states that health, like other areas, is a human right, and as such, any decision must be made on the basis of evidence that will provide better health. There is a global recognition of the importance of evidence-based health systems for achieving continuous improvement in health, saving lives and responding more effectively to the needs of citizens (World Health Organization, 2004, 2008). Science can identify solutions to urgent health problems such as COVID-19, but only from a

public-policy dialogue perspective can most of these solutions become a reality.

Based on scientific evidence, many deaths could have been avoided, and less strict measures regarding lockdowns could have been taken. The evidence has always said that it was necessary:

comprehensive (and, in the extreme, universal) and effective testing and contact tracing systems; provide information to individuals and local public Health bodies promptly; create a sense of trust and responsibility; and put in place economic and social support that helps to increase participation in testing, contact tracing and adherence to isolation advice (Kontis et al., 2020).

Evidence is necessary for decision-makers to anticipate and identify problems, calculate risks and reduce the uncertainty generated by decision-making in complex moments, but the participation of citizens in a situation of equal dialogue is essential to develop effective policies (Décieux, 2020; Álvarez et al., 2020).

### **"You Guys Are in Charge, but You Don't Know". The Clamor of the Spanish Scientists in front of the Measures Taken**

Just as science, from Copernicus through Darwin to Einstein, has been an exercise in the gradual erosion of human vanity – the decentering of the human being from our understanding of the world - so pandemics have eroded governmental omnipotence. Nation-states have slowly had to succumb to curbs of their power and authority (Horton, 2020, p. 32)

Although the first wave might have been unpredictable, the second wave in some parts of Spain was highly predictable (García-Basteiro et al., 2020a). The western world did not take the danger of COVID-19 seriously and the small number of scientists who advised governments did not offer an alternative to the dominant expectations. Horton (2020) wonders if they really read the reports from China and listened or sought guidance from doctors and scientists who had already lived through the effects of COVID-19.



It has been shown that the political process has failed. Although some governments have claimed to be following science, the task of policymakers is not only to follow the advice given, but to examine, analyze and question, and dialogue with all parties. A lack of a team with a shared vision of values to manage the pandemic has led to a lack of public confidence (Horton, 2020).

One of the problems has been not listening and not showing humility to failure (Horton, 2020). This was said by the scientist Oriol Mitjà, Associate Professor at the Germans Trias Research Institute, head of the STI Unit of the Germans Trias i Pujol Hospital and Associated Researcher at IS Global, in an interview that was very criticized. He stated that the Catalan Minister of Health showed both a lack of knowledge to manage the crisis and a lack of humility to listen to scientists (Planta Baixa, 2020). Even the Catalan media tried to discredit the scientist instead of making a critical analysis of the situation (El matí de Catalunya Radio, 2020; Rosel, 2020). Among the research that Mitjà showed in the interview to exemplify this negligence, he explained that if a Spanish person had lived in Germany during the first wave of the COVID-19, they would have had 10 fewer possibilities of dying, and if they had lived in Japan, 100 fewer possibilities.

This failure, supported by the data (Our World in Data, 2020) is not only an error in decision-making, but an example of state negligence and a failure to exercise the duty of the government, exposing citizens to serious harm. Thus, "governments were causally complicit and responsible for these failures" (Horton, 2020, p. 85).

One of the problems to highlight is the confusion between scientists and "experts". This has generated disenchantment among the citizens, who have seen how the same "experts" who advised against wearing masks were the same ones who later made mandatory to wear them. Mitjà reported that the head of the Coordination Center of Alerts and Health Emergencies, Fernando Simón, was not capable of managing a pandemic. For that purpose, he referred to his lack of relevant publications and a lack of a consolidated research career (Nació Digital, 2020 October 5).

A crisis such as the one that COVID-19 has caused goes beyond a health crisis: it is also a political crisis that demands the highest political level to protect the lives of citizens. It is necessary to incorporate more

scientists, but also a greater scientific literacy to be able to govern, as, without this knowledge and evidence-based decision-making, it is very difficult for citizens to trust (Horton, 2020).

Even in aspects such as face coverings there is no international consensus, which shows the influence that cultural norms have on the incorporation of evidence. Thus, this fact does not help in making appropriate decisions (Han et al., 2020).

A group of 55 Spanish scientific societies with more than 170,000 health professionals launched a campaign on [change.org](https://change.org) to collect signatures urging political parties, among other aspects, to base themselves on the best scientific evidence possible, free from political ideologies, in the face of the pandemic. A national protocol with common criteria and with an exclusively scientific basis should be drawn up (Change.org, 2020a). Also, the Real Sociedad Matemática Española, in the presentation of the white book of mathematics, asked politicians for greater rigor and scientific culture (Rius, 2020).

### **The Role of Universities in the Face of Scientific Evidence**

Contrary to what one may believe, governments are capable of making decisions without evidence or relevant research (Jones, 2014). Even universities, where knowledge, research, and critical thinking are supposed to be their essence, have been able to make decisions without first consulting the scientific evidence or the available academic literature (Jones, 2014).

In the words of Jones (2014), given the important role that universities play in our societies, both for social and economic development and the high level of public and private investment they receive, the decisions they make are key to social improvement. It must be the universities who provide highly qualified human resources to public policymakers, and not assume, as has happened in Catalonia, a government decision that scientists themselves have reported as wrong.

Paltiel et al. (2020) carried out an investigation based on the adaptation to a simple compartmental epidemic model to capture the essential features of the situation university decision-makers were facing: the epidemiology of SARS-CoV-2; the natural history of COVID-19

illness; and regular mass screening to detect, isolate and contain the presence of SARS-CoV-2 in a residential college setting. With this research, it would be possible to prove, in the absence of an effective vaccine, what would happen with the reopening of the campuses in September in the USA. It relied on the assumption that the best hope was a behavioral-based strategy and regular follow-up to rapidly detect, isolate, and contain new infections of COVID-19 when they occur. This research was based on the fact that the opening of the campuses posed serious risks, not only to the university community (faculty, students, and PAS) but also to the rest of society. The authors of the research appealed for the responsibility of university presidents regarding the impact of their decisions on the opening of the campuses (Paltiel et al., 2020).

There is literature on the importance of teaching practices in universities derived from best or high-quality evidence (Smith & Baik, 2019; Jones, 2014). Moreover, universities, as Bourguignon (2019) states, are one of the few institutions that can cope with the continuous drifts of hyperpartisan and interest-driven-politics. It is these institutions that must become providers of honest knowledge brokers (high quality and nonpartisan research) to improve policy decisions. However, although higher education institutions have always been and should be an example of defense and promotion of science and truth for the improvement of society, regardless of political pressures (Bourguignon, 2019; Steinmetz, 2018), the reality in Spain has been different. In some cases, it has been the students themselves who, out of responsibility, have decided to self-confine and demand quality online teaching, as has been the case with the degree in Social Education from the University of Granada (Redacción, 2020).

### **Return to the University Classes in Catalonia: The Context**

As in most countries, the 2019-2020 academic year ended online at most universities due to the lockdown situation in the countries. However, the debate arose about whether the 2020-2021 academic year should begin (face-to-face, hybrid, or online), at a time when total lockdown had ended but contagion had not stopped.

In institutions like universities, it should be an obligation to work based on scientific evidence. Nonetheless, the performance of the Spanish universities, and specifically the Catalan ones, in the decision-making process for the start of the academic year was not like that in all cases. Two main reasons stand out, being the first one the submission to the power established by the government through the so-called PROCICAT (Territorial Plan of Civil Protection of Catalonia), and specifically the action plan for emergencies associated with communicable diseases with high risk<sup>1</sup> potential. This plan was established by the Catalan government as a protection to the transmission of COVID and as a support to what Public Health dictated for the containment of the disease. It aimed to maintain the basic and essential services for society and establishing the necessary coordination between all agencies involved in the response. As will be shown in the results section, the proposals of this plan were applied in many cases not taking into account whether they responded to scientific evidence or not. The second reason is linked to a discourse among more “progressive” sectors that argued online teaching was a manipulation to sink the public university and prioritize the private (Change.org, 2020b; Silió, 2020). As Mols et al. (2020) indicated, the rise of anti-establishment populism seems to have generated a confrontation among political professionals who are skeptical of scientific research. Therefore, policy researchers now have another challenge, which is not only to persuade policymakers of the need to operate by scientific evidence, but also the public at large.

## **Methods**

### **Procedures and Sample**

Catalonia has been the chosen territory for this research. There are 12 universities in Catalonia. 7 of these are public, whereas 5 are private.

The participants of the sample have been, on the one hand, the rectors or teaching vice-rectors at the Catalan universities and, on the other hand, professors of some of these universities.

To contact the rectors and vice-rectors, an email was sent to the address provided by the official website of the universities. In the e-mail,

it was informed that a research was being carried out on the decision-making process for the opening of the 2020-2021 academic year in the universities and that the information would be used for the elaboration of a scientific article. In some cases, we were asked the questions via email before the interview, to be able to find the information beforehand. In the first place, an interview was requested with the rector of the university. However, in some cases, the request was redirected to the vice-rector of teaching (in 3 cases) and, in the rest, the interview was conducted with the rectors. The three universities we did not do the interview with the rector or vice-rector of teaching were the University of Barcelona (the rector's office referred to the time of the elections in which they were), the University Abad Oliva (which did not answer the email) and the University Pompeu Fabra, which at first responded positively to the conduct of the interview, but it did not materialize.

The interviews, due to the COVID-19 situation, were carried out online on different platforms according to the request of each university (Microsoft Teams, Meet, or Zoom). Before conducting the interview, an oral request for permission to record was made and the use of the data for the preparation of an article was reminded.

Table 1.

*Rectors and Vice-Rectors who participated in the interviews.*

<b>Position</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>University</b>
Rector	R1	U1
Rector	R2	U2
Rector	R3	U3
Vice-Rector for Teaching	R4	U4
Rector	R5	U5
Vice-Rector of Documentation	R6	U6
Rector	R7	U7
Vice-Rector of Documentation	R8	U8

The contact with the faculty of different universities was carried out through academic contacts of the authors of this research. An email was sent to different colleagues in different departments and universities

offering the option to participate in an interview. The interview was conducted with those who agreed. They were sent an email with information about the objective of the research and that the data would be used for the elaboration of an article. The email had attached a consent form that they had to return signed, with their agreement to participate in the research and for the data to be used for the present article. As in the interviews with the rectors and vice-rectors, the interviews had to be conducted on different online platforms.

Table 2.  
*Faculty of Catalan universities participating in the interview.*

<b>Code</b>	<b>Category</b>	<b>University</b>
Lecturer 1	Associate Professor	U1
Lecturer 2	Aggregate Professor	U1
Lecturer 3	Associate Professor	U9
Lecturer 4	Adjunct Professor	U9
Lecturer 5	Associate Professor	U4
Lecturer 6	Associate Professor	U8
Lecturer 7	Lecturer	U8
Lecturer 8	Associate Professor	U3

The interviews lasted about 30 minutes and focused on three main aspects:

- 1) The decision made for the start of the academic year in the different universities (whether the face-to-face, online or hybrid option was chosen).
- 2) Scientific evidence used for decision-making.
- 3) Feedback from the university community on the decision taken.

### **Reviewing Documentation**

In order to conduct the interviews and contextualize the research, the protocols and documentation that the universities have publicly displayed on their websites for the entire university community were reviewed. In some cases, e-mails were also sent to the faculty of the different

universities informing them of the decisions taken to deal with the pandemic and how to act. This information helped us to find out what kind of information had reached the university community, and to compare it with what the interviewees were telling us.

Some press releases have been used to show some of the reactions at state level to the situation of COVID in the universities, which has been considered interesting to reflect in the article to contextualize some of the situations that have been experienced.

## **Results**

The results show the reasons why one of the universities did choose to make evidence-based decisions in the first place and the motives followed by the universities that made the decisions without following the evidence.

### **Beginning of the Academic Year in the Different Catalan Universities**

Of the cases analyzed, only one of the universities (U1) opted for a course start with the minimum attendance possible. This is the same university that, as will be seen in the next section, has been the only one to claim to use scientific evidence for this and other decisions linked to the pandemic.

In the words of the rector herself, despite the reluctance caused by not going ahead with the face-to-face classes of the university as agreed in June 2020, she opted to make the data public on the university website, so everyone would know at all times what decision to take based on those data:

and I also found within our own institution a certain reluctance to change a little what we had done in June, but I think that after analyzing it and especially after seeing these indexes of the probability of rebound. And, this has been, I believe, one of the things more, one of the things that I think that we can feel more happy about, that when it occurred to us, listen, let's hang it on the web and every day when one enters, knows how the situation is in all our municipalities (R1).

Once the decision was made, the U1 rector sent an e-mail to the entire university community in which, offering epidemiological data, the decision to reduce to the minimum possible the presence on campus was made. As can be seen in the email sent on September 11, 2020:

Last September 8, the rectoral team and the deans and directors of the center were able to assess the current situation of the pandemic and the incidence in the territorial area of the U1 after listening to professors Àlex Arenas and Antoni Castro, experts in the field. Both analyzed the current epidemiological situation, with values of the rate of confirmed cases per 100,000 inhabitants 4 and 5 times higher than the recommended threshold of 50 inhabitants, data that they foresee will be difficult to improve in the next two months. Considering this, they recommend us to reduce to the minimum the presence in our campuses: this would significantly reduce the possibility of contagion, contribute to minimizing the spread of the pandemic in our territory and avoid an eventual paralysis of the face-to-face activity in a few weeks.

Among the arguments for this decision, the same rector affirmed that she was doing it out of social responsibility so as not to be responsible for the increase in cases of negative behavior with the known epidemiological data:

Let's say, what we wanted was that the university did not contribute, calling the number of students that would be the usual ones on the campuses, to distribute, also with public transport, with all that they had to take, moving around the city ... to generate more noise (R1).

The rest of the universities interviewed confirmed that they had chosen to have as much in-person attendance as the pandemic situation would allow. As shown by some of the responses from rectors and vice-rectors:

So, what did we say we would do when we would return? The message was very clear, maximize the presence and minimize the residence. Therefore, that we would try from day 1 to make the maximum of teaching face-to-face, this was already said by all the rectors and from day 1 we knew that the most sensitive group is the first grade. And we guaranteed the first-year students, because we also had to guarantee



them in terms of registration, if the legislation allows us, if PROCICAT allows us... First it would be in low density but everything face-to-face. Therefore, we are going to split, we made a calendar from day 1 with everything first split to be able to do it in low density (R5).

### **Scientific Evidence in Decision-making in the Face of Power Pressures**

The only university that chose to rely on evidence was the same one that chose to start with the minimum attendance. The rector stated:

So, it's a little... but I think the easiest thing to do has been to reflect on the data...(…) To see how the pandemic data was evolving... the thing is that, what couldn't be is what you wanted to do, not taking it into account, because the decision we made could make the red become redder or help it become redder.... let's say because until now we have not been a noise for the system, while it has been red and maroon, but this does not go down ... but if we open all the doors with the maximum freedom, it would mean that we would not contribute, but what we would do is accelerating the conflict. And this has been a bit of a vision (R1).

The rector stated that compliance with PROCICAT should not prevent universities from relying on scientific evidence of epidemiology and that the fact that no scientific data were being collected for processing the tool should be challenged, as expressed in the following quotation. Alluding also to the social responsibility that the university has towards the expansion or containment of the pandemic:

And there was this little premise of saying, there is a degree of university autonomy. And this means that you perhaps don't have to do the same. There was the moment when PROCICAT made the resolution of universities (...) some guidelines that we received from health [Department of Health]. When we received them, I said, both actively and passively, that I wanted them to incorporate the rate of regrowth, because it didn't make sense for you to tell everyone a face-to-face distance of one and a half meters, two meters and so on, when you were in an area that was perhaps in green or orange, that in one that was in red. And I was telling them, if you would let us adapt it according to

this, we would react and so on. It was not possible, well, that same idea that we cooked up here among us, our experts and so on, let's put it into practice. And also a little bit, as a social model, I mean, why do we do it? Well, we do it out of social responsibility to the whole community, not just the university community, right? (R1).

In the case of wearing or not wearing a mask, even at the time when the protocols of both the Spanish and Catalan governments stated that it was not necessary, several universities opted for its mandatory use in university facilities. The arguments were the scientific evidence on the effectiveness of its use in preventing contagion. These are the statements of some of the university officials on this subject:

Because it has already been shown that the mask is a protective element. Therefore, we, from the very first moment, even before the government said it, had already agreed in June that we would go with a mask by all means, always. Well, it was better then, when there was an appeal from the Department, because we felt more supported that the initiative we had taken was the right one (R1).

The counselor said a day before that without the mask, we didn't agree at all but...and there was no paper, it was just an oral intervention by the Health Counselor, she said this and we didn't apply it (R3).

Some of the rectors and vice-rectors also expressed the inconsistencies of a regulation that did not have the voice of the university community and that in some cases made proposals that precisely promoted greater mobility of students instead of a reduction in their numbers:

We had to do the theory classes online and the laboratories could be done face-to-face and I told the general director, when we had a meeting, I told her: Chemical Institute can't do this. The objective of the norm is not useful because the students have laboratories every day. If they can come to the laboratory, I will make them come every day, and therefore I will not reduce mobility. It does not make any sense, and what do I have to do? The theory class before they do it at home and then delay the laboratory so they have time to come because I live in X and so I can get there. It doesn't make any sense, right? Therefore, a rule like

this, which as a general recommendation is good to make the rule, but it can be a disaster (R5).

Regarding the answers on decision-making of the universities that opted for maximum attendance, their assertions were based, not on scientific evidence, but on following government ordinances as we can see in the following answers:

We have to attend to the recommendations of the health units, the guidelines, therefore we have to comply with them, that is what PROCICAT says, in some way we have to put it into practice because we already have enough problems, we don't need to generate more, therefore if there is an authority that commands, what we have to try is to support them from the beginning, more or less support them because if not... The image that we give to people in society, who have to be aware that we have to follow what they tell us, is that this is fatal, so we do not question whether we like it or not, we comply (...) I think that as a rector the institution has to follow what is agreed upon PROCICAT and if you have any problems or something, you tell them through the representatives of PROCICAT (R2).

We made our decisions based on what PROCICAT told us, I mean that we were very clear about whether or not we agreed with those who told us (...) Therefore, we always relied on PROCICAT's decisions and it is true that, even if we were within the law, we took the most flexible band (...) We were very disciplined with what Health said, which we considered being comfortably correct, and, for those who considered that we were messing up, well... we accepted it (R3).

So, we are referring to all this, not that we have done some bibliographic research and from some meta-analysis with these evidence we do it, right? We are governed by a series of measures approved by PROCICAT that guarantee the most optimal conditions possible with the information that you have at that time, right? (R4).

So, based on what scientific criteria? Well, based on what came from PROCICAT basically, we have always been aware of the Department of Health, through the Department of Universities, well... the Department of Business and Knowledge, which is the one that has competence in the universities and what the PROCICAT told us (R8).

### **The Reaction of the University Community**

Through the voices of the faculty members interviewed, we also wanted to learn how decisions were received by the university community regarding the comfort of their teaching.

In the case of the University 1 faculty interviewed, they explain their agreement on how the decisions were taken because they opted for scientific evidence from the beginning:

I think that the measures taken by U1 have been supported by scientific evidence. In fact, a contingency plan was created where people from different areas such as Àlex Arenas or people involved with the medical school have participated. The measures taken have been focused on the prevention and protection of the entire university community and the arguments presented by the rector follow the same approach. That is to say, from the very beginning, the measures have been argued in relation to the situation we were living in and have been presented in a very transparent way (Lecturer 1).

In the case of a professor at one of the universities where the rector was unable to arrange an interview, she told us that, in her case, there was no information on how to act following the evidence, which made her uncertain as to whether she was doing the best job in the situation. In her case, the university where she works opted for face-to-face teaching:

We have received communications through notifications from the Deanery or the Rectorate. They have sent us the protocols established by OSSMA (health and environment safety office) and by PROCICAT, but I have no reference to scientific research to justify the measures taken (...) Yes, I have given classes to a small group of masters. I am not aware that I have seen scientific evidence to justify this. (Lecturer 3).

The professors of the universities that, according to the interviews conducted with the rectors or vice-rectors, had acted in accordance with the government's protocols, also expressed concern that the only criterion to justify the decision-making process was PROCICAT.

In the case of a U4 teacher, she explains that:

The argument has always been to take into account what could happen at the health level, which did appear in several places, that because of the security issue, the pandemic, because of the situation, to ensure the security of everyone, we had to act in this way. Although before doing the interview, looking at the documentation and if it referenced something scientific, all the quotes are institutional regulations of the Generalitat. At no time they looked for or quoted specific things, medical or sanitary, despite the fact that a management team was made (Lecturer 5).

Other teachers also made statements in this vein:

The feeling I have as a member of this university community is that even though it was always... part of what came out in the emails was that, 'you must know that we follow the recommendations of Department of Health at all times', in the end I don't know if it's a phrase that has been put into practice. (...) (Lecturer 6).

No...there has not been an accompaniment of scientific evidence... This is what there is and this is what has to be done... That is to say, not... They are based on the decisions of our department of health that correspond to us, according to them... But I tell you... I don't know about the security distance that is being fulfilled in small groups, therefore I don't know up to what point we are in a margin of... Clarity in this sense, I don't know... (Lecturer 8).

Several professors also commented that one of the arguments given, not based on evidence, was that they worked in a face-to-face university, so they should keep it that way as long as it was possible:

The argument I have been given is that U9 is a face-to-face university and that, if there is not a situation that prevents it, it will continue being a face-to-face one (Lecturer 3).

(...) that we are not the UOC<sup>2</sup>... This explanation that I think in public Universities in general has come out everywhere... Well, if the students wanted a University like the UOC, they would already go to the UOC, we have to offer something different blah, blah, blah... But well, this does not respond to an argument of... In this case, it's not a scientific argument about health, but rather... It's a drift towards another side (Lecturer 6).

We have received emails from the rectorate and later from the deanery, saying that we are a faculty where the face-to-face teaching is like our identity mark and that whatever possible must be done to maintain this face-to-face classes and not become a UOC or UNED<sup>1</sup> (Lecturer 7).

To affirm that face-to-face teaching must be maintained because they are not distance-learning universities is another argument that is not based on any scientific argument. This reinforces that, above acting on the basis of data that contribute to the curbing of the pandemic, there are arguments based on the belief of how the university classes should be used.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

Although, as has been seen, Spain is among the countries with the best health system, the data on infection and deaths during the COVID-19 pandemic do not correspond to this healthcare infrastructure ([García-Basteiro et al., 2020a](#)).

Among the main reasons for this negative situation, it clearly stands out that scientific evidence was not taken into account when making political decisions that would affect the entire population in such a devastating way. To the non-use of scientific evidence the lack of transparency is added, by not making public the disaggregated data of the affected population from which to understand how the pandemic was evolving ([García-Basteiro et al., 2020a](#); [Trias-Llimós et al., 2020](#)). This situation has led to infections and deaths in Spain being much higher than in other countries, very much in contrast to a high quality health system and efforts on the part of health personnel. The director of the prestigious medical journal *The Lancet*, Richard Horton, speaks in terms of the complicity of these errors about governments themselves ([2020](#)).

Regarding this action denounced on several occasions in articles published in *The Lancet* ([The Lancet Public Health, 2020](#); [García-Basteiro et al., 2020a](#); [García-Basteiro et al., 2020b](#); [Trias-Llimós et al., 2020](#)), higher education institutions in Catalonia have mostly opted to follow the slogans of the government instead of using scientific evidence, contrary to what scientists, both national and international, demanded. Moreover, except in one of the universities interviewed in the research

presented, these universities opted for submitting to power by assuming the protocol (in the case of Catalonia, the so-called PROCICAT). This shows that these higher education institutions did not ensure what was the best to do in order to be promoters of actions to improve and provide tools for improving the situation of the pandemic. In addition to this submission to power, a populist anti-establishment discourse has been found (Mols et al., 2020), which stated that the move to online teaching was a way of prioritizing and benefitting private universities (in the case of Catalonia, the UOC or the UNED), and, therefore, sinking public university. This was stated by several of the interviewed professors when they received the guidelines in their universities to continue with the maximum in-person attendance as possible.

The present article is a glimpse and reflection on how higher education institutions are not being, in the presented case, the pioneers in applying scientific evidence to be promoters of a change that helps to stop the pandemic. In addition, it highlights the only case that has chosen to do so by overcoming both the submission to the established power and the criticism based on an anti-establishment discourse.

The review of the scientific literature, together with the results of the fieldwork carried out, suggests the need to continue reflecting on the role that higher education institutions can play in situations like the one we are currently living with the COVID-19 pandemic, when governments do not always respond as they should. Higher education institutions could be the ones promoting and being an example of the elaboration of public policy dialogue, where decisions are made based on scientific evidence and in dialogue with citizens.

### **Conflict of Interest**

On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict interest.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> In the following link you can find more details (information in Catalan): <https://interior.gencat.cat/ca/detalls/Article/PROCICAT-pla-dactuacio-per-Pandemies>

<sup>2</sup> Open University of Catalonia, a distance-learning university

<sup>3</sup> National University of Distance Education

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