

Speech Summer Ceremony: Reflections on the Past Year

The academic year 2020-2021 was, as you all experienced, an unusual year. A year in which most lecture halls remained empty. A year in which our faculty garden did not buzz with students and staff enjoying each other's company: This year's buzzing came from the bees taking residence in our new bee hotel. A year that gave rise to many challenges that we needed to face.

A year that, at the same time, offered unique and exciting opportunities to grow as a member of our academic community. When I met our rector for the first time in September, she gave me the advice to step up and boldly experiment. As I took this advice to heart, unexpected doors opened. I got the chance to try out our new *Active Learning Spaces*, where I learned to teach fully hybrid. And in my endeavor to get the best out of my hybrid and online teaching, I crossed faculty boundaries and was welcomed in many online learning communities.

I experimented with Virtual Reality in our academic teacher training program. I am grateful that even when the COVID-19 measures grew more strict, I was able to offer this powerful and rewarding learning experience to my students. I learned that our purposefully designed small-scale on-campus activities had a large-scale impact on our students. For students whose internships were cancelled, and, as I learned, especially for those in need of social interaction.

And I wasn't the only one who took to creative experimenting. Colleagues introduced active learning modules in Nestor or used Gather.town to meet with students. Open air lectures were organized. Our student association ODIOM set up a buddy system matching 200 students to battle loneliness. Hence, I dare to say that our education and academic community at times even flourished, thanks to these amazing pioneers.

As the year comes to an end, a sense of pride takes hold of me. I am proud of all students, teachers, researchers, and supportive staff of our university, who rose to a seemingly never-ending challenge. Who persevered, excelled, and continuously reinvented themselves and their education in the most creative ways. We opened our homes, we shared our knowledge, we adapted, we experimented, we learned by doing, we made mistakes, we revised, but we never gave up. We are resilient.

Looking back, I realize that if you stay true to yourself, do what you love, show compassion, and are willing to ask for help, even the COVID-19 challenges are far from insurmountable. Even if I failed at times, I learned. And isn't that exactly what science is all about?

I truly hope that the amazing efforts made in redesigning our education and all lessons learned will feed into the new academic year, and more importantly, into our academic community.

Before we part for a well-deserved summer break, I want to encourage you to take time to look back and to celebrate every achievement, especially the seemingly smallest ones, as the lessons you've learned throughout the year will help you to leave every future situation better than you found it.