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# UOC Rural Network: empowering rural regions in Spain through holistic learning and research initiatives



## SUMMARY

The Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC) is a global and digital university whose mission is to provide people with lifelong learning, responding to the changing needs of individuals and organisations. This includes reducing inequalities in access to education between territories and students, particularly those residing in remote locations. Committed to the social impact of its activity, the UOC has embarked on a strategy of collaboration with the rural community, inspired by the **EU's long-term vision for rural areas**. To this end, it has created the **UOC Rural Network** with its own resources, a space for co-creation and knowledge transfer aimed at promoting processes of positive transformation in contemporary rural territories, using participatory governance that favours the inclusion of diverse views, voices and perspectives.



## CONTEXT

The UOC is aware of the issue of **depopulation in rural areas**. The opportunities offered by **digital education and transformation**, both to the productive sector and to society as a whole, can play a crucial role in addressing this situation. Due to its educational model, the UOC is particularly committed to providing educational opportunities for individuals residing in rural environments. The UOC is developing knowledge in areas such as rural digital connectivity, e-health, agroecology, tourism, gender systems, cultural and artistic production, and gastronomic and food culture – both from research and from the student community linked to the rural environment. The UOC Rural Network roadmap consists of: 1) drawing up a map of knowledge, a map of agents in the territory and a map of opportunities in 2023 for the creation of a network of researchers; promotion of scholarship programmes, internships and final projects aimed at relating training to the challenges of rural areas; 2) preparation of an analysis of the UOC's social impact in rural areas; 3) extension of the network to students, alumni and other professors linked to rural areas in 2024, structuring the research activity and presentation of new projects; and 4) consolidation of the network's research activities by 2025.

**Themes** Research and innovation, education and training, youth, digital technologies, women, entrepreneurship, tourism and heritage. **Rural revitalisation**

**Country:** Spain

**Organisation:** Universitat Oberta de Catalunya, UOC Rural Network, academic and research institution

**Start & end date:** 09/22 - 09/25

**Budget:** 204 000 € annually

**Funding sources:** UOC own funding

**Website:**

<https://www.uoc.edu/es/estudios/becas-ayudas/becas-nueva-ruralidad>

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## OBJECTIVES

The reduction of territorial and social disparities, with a particular focus on addressing gender inequalities, while creating favourable conditions and scenarios in which rural areas can be a source of transformation and progress.





## ACTIVITIES, KEY ACTORS, AND TIMELINE

In pursuit of its rural development objectives, the UOC embarked on several initiatives. It began by creating a network of alliances between September 2022 and September 2023, engaging in dialogues with more than 25 individuals and organisations involved in rural development. These discussions involved active participation in the **Rural Agenda in Catalonia** and collaboration with the **Spanish Network for Rural Development (REDR)**. Another significant effort during this period was the establishment of the **UOC's rural scholarship programme**, designed to support students residing in rural areas. The university also initiated Rural Awards for the best final projects dedicated to addressing rural challenges. Additionally, **internships in rural areas** were offered on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, the UOC Rural Network was launched, bringing together UOC researchers involved in projects related to rural areas. The network's purpose is to coordinate collective efforts to address the evolving challenges faced by modern rural communities. Connections were fostered between the UOC Rural Network and internal and external stakeholders with interests in rural areas to better collaborate and tackle specific challenges together. In this respect, using the Learning Circles methodology, the UOC facilitated two working sessions that drew a total of 21 participants. The first session involved internal actors and allowed current and future research potential, along with new stakeholders, to be identified. In the second session, the UOC expanded the participant pool to include both internal and external stakeholders, resulting in a roadmap that unites the university's research and teaching strengths with the needs of local agents. Moreover, the UOC forged connections between the UOC Rural Network and the broader university community, including students, alumni and teachers. The aim was to create a network that fosters collaboration and knowledge sharing among these groups. Lastly, the UOC worked on strengthening the participatory final projects programme. This involved enhancing the link between teaching and the generation of practical and applied knowledge, specifically tailored to address real challenges in rural territories.



## RESULTS

The UOC has demonstrated remarkable achievements in its holistic approach, spanning education, research and knowledge transfer. In the educational domain, **over 10 000 students from rural areas have benefitted**. Additionally, more than 16 000 alumni now reside in rural regions, becoming valuable community contributors. Furthermore, the UOC facilitated 18 internships within rural areas, offering students practical experience, complemented by the awarding of 170 scholarships. In terms of research, a team of 23 researchers has been actively involved in projects focused on rural areas, resulting in the successful completion of 18 research projects addressing diverse challenges encountered in rural regions. The UOC's commitment to knowledge transfer is exemplified by the presentation of transformation project proposals, signifying a dedication to fostering positive change in rural areas. This commitment extends to the creation of four innovative start-ups, each tailored to meet the unique needs of rural communities.



## SUCCESS FACTORS/LESSONS LEARNT

The success of the UOC Rural Network is attributed to its holistic approach, encompassing the entire university and fostering collaboration with external stakeholders. This vision, founded on co-creating knowledge tailored to the genuine needs and challenges of rural regions, represents its primary innovation, along with its positioning of active listening to all stakeholders. Established with the purpose of facilitating long-term, practical research and teaching, the UOC Rural Network thrives internal resources while actively applying for external funding. Its multidisciplinary and cross-cutting nature enables the alignment of university capabilities with societal and institutional priorities, underpinning its future sustainability as a valuable knowledge resource for rural areas and communities. Functioning as an international network of partnerships and cooperation, the UOC Rural Network stands as a model that can be replicated by similar institutions or in different countries.



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