

Aalto University President Ilkka Niemelä, opening address for the 2020–2021 academic year

Honoured guests, professors and members of Aalto community,

Friends of science, art and education,

Dear colleagues and students,

I wish to welcome you to Day One of the eleventh academic year of Aalto University.

I want to give a particularly warm welcome to our new students, who are joining us for the first time. You must be feeling excited, but maybe also unsure: how can you become part of the Aalto community under such extraordinary circumstances where most encounters nowadays happen like this, online, because of the corona pandemic.

We want to make sure that you have a smooth start, so we have prioritised on-campus teaching for first-year students. Please don't hesitate to ask for support in these exceptional times – the personnel and our whole community are here for you. I hope we can meet safely on campus as soon as possible!

This year, all of us have been hugely affected by the worldwide tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic. The global outbreak is an example of what is called a 'wicked problem'. The crisis has revealed the mutual interdependency of countries – and that there are no simple solutions to major challenges.

Internationally, the coronavirus crisis has raised new tensions in academia and in politics. Internationalisation and openness – qualities that define all universities – are under threat from multiple directions. The Aalto University community is actively multicultural and diverse. As one of the most international universities of Europe, we defend the values of diversity and equality, and we condemn all racism and discrimination.

On top of the human suffering it has caused, the corona crisis has also delivered a tremendous shock to the economy. This has led to recovery measures on an unprecedented scale, with tremendous amounts of debt

incurring for the funding. This is also true in the case of Finland. It is clear that we shall not get through this merely by savings. We need growth.

Where does growth come from? The rise in Finland's material standard of living for the last 50 years has been based in growth in productivity. Most of this growth can be attributed to two factors: two thirds has arisen from new ideas, technologies and innovation; the remaining nearly one third is the result of education. Research and education are therefore the major engines of economic growth!

The major challenges to global sustainability have yet to be overcome, however. Indeed, immediate measures must be taken.

I believe we must use all our means to seize the opportunity presented as the economy recovers and is balanced again in time. The battered economy does not need a return to the old, a replication of the old models; it needs above all a transformation, built anew on the foundation of sustainable development.

Finland is uniquely poised to gain competitive advantage as a creator of sustainable solutions. We have top level research, education, expertise and business.

The coronavirus crisis has also shown that first-rate education and research make society more durable and adaptable, that is, more resilient.

What kind of structural is needed? A significant contribution is needed towards education as well as research and innovation, in the area of sustainable development in particular.

What is now needed are substantial investments from the public, as well as the private sector. Global challenges can only be addressed through working together so this requires sufficiently large centres of excellence that include universities, research institutes and companies, all with front-line expertise and a lively exchange of ideas and people.

We published our new strategy in January, before the coronavirus crisis. Although the crisis has changed our operating environment in many ways, the key message of our strategy – building a sustainable future – is now more important than ever.

Building a sustainable future requires new, research-based knowledge, novel solutions and game changers with radical creativity and a pioneering,

entrepreneurial mindset. There is also growing need for continuous learning as many already in the job market need to update their skills.

The increased demand is particularly strong in the fields studied at Aalto University. Accordingly, the Aalto strategy states that we will take a greater societal responsibility for education and continuous learning in our fields.

In its supplementary budget in June, the Finnish government allocated 124 million to increasing the number of student intake available at higher education institutions. This allowed Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences combined to admit an additional 4000 students this autumn. Of these, 200 are coming to Aalto University.

I am very grateful to our departments and degree programmes for finding workable solutions to make this happen at very short notice. The student intake will continue to increase in the coming years with the help of strategic funding allocated to universities. What matters is that we do our share and thus help build a more sustainable future in this way, too.

The digital leap that we took this spring due to the coronavirus pandemic will surely give us new insight into how teaching and learning can take new forms, for instance, through combining digital solutions with contact teaching, and offering targeted advice to students while allowing them to tailor their study modules to meet their needs.

In the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, our new, living strategy has one particular strength. The world around us keeps changing at an accelerating pace, and there will be new global crises ahead. That is precisely why our strategy is reviewed on a regular basis: we want to stay proactive. When the world around us changes, we change by updating our strategic choices as needed.

However, what remains unchanged, and gives us long-term direction, is the very core of our being: our powerful, shared values.

- **Responsibility** - Working for a better world, we act sustainably for the wellbeing of all.
- **Courage**: Taking on challenges with agility, creativity and passion, we aim high.
- **Collaboration**: Diversity is part of who we are and we foster an empowered community that shines by working together.

Last spring was exceptionally difficult for all of us. We worked long hours – many of us from the crack of dawn until late-night hours – and had to take care of the wellbeing of our loved ones on top of work. Despite this, we managed to keep working and studying astoundingly well. I want to thank all of you for your responsibility, flexibility and collaboration under these highly challenging circumstances.

The corona crisis is not over yet, and what in the spring looked like a sprint seems to be turning into a marathon. It is certain that we will continue to experience difficult moments, but we will overcome these together as a community relying on our shared values. It is important to take responsibility for the wellbeing of ourselves and others. Let's collaborate and help each other. Right now, courage means setting boundaries. It is important to find a balance between life and work. Remember to prioritise and do what really matters. At the end of the working day, shut down your computer and relax. Rest, enjoy your family and hobbies. In this way, let's take Aalto values into our daily lives.

Dear audience,

Aalto University has now operated for 10 academic years and has gained international recognition. Our network attracts talent, ideas, investment and collaboration partners from around the world. Our work makes a difference. We are helping society get through the coronavirus crisis, and in doing so, are contributing to a better world.

We have accomplished this because of each and every one of you: our personnel and students. I am very proud of and moved by your accomplishments. You have made Aalto a place where generation after generation, people bring their talent, enthusiasm and ideas into play, helping us build a more sustainable future.

Thank you!