

Aalto-yliopiston ylioppilaskunnan puheenjohtaja Olli Kesseli  
Lukuvuoden avajaiset 1.9.2020

Honourable President, Provost, dear Aalto community,  
Kunnianarvoisa rehtori, provosti, rakas Aalto-yhteisö,  
Högtärade rektor, provost, kära Aaltogemenskap,

The start of the new academic year has probably never been filled with so much apprehension of things to come. We have just left behind us a spring of exceptional circumstances: we have learned, worked and researched from the safety of our homes, separated from each other. We have had to reorganize our everyday lives, face the mundanity of staying in, talk to friends and family through video call and wait for the basic reproduction number of the novel coronavirus to go down and the state of emergency to lift.

But the bright minds in Aalto have been a crucial part of this fight. The research project coordinated by Aalto that modelled the transmission of airborne particles that contain the virus provided brand new information on how long the aerosols containing SARS-CoV-2 can remain in the air. We had this result within months of the virus making its way into Finland. This research is just one of the examples that make even this unthought-of fall filled with hope. It is exactly the Aalto values - courage, responsibility, and collaboration - that keep our society up and running in these unprecedented circumstances.

Det här året markerar början av ett nytt, betydande årtionde för Aalto och världen. Jubileumsfonden för Finlands självständighet Sitra har namngett fem megatrender som revolutionerar vårt samhälle på 2020-talet. Den ekologiska återuppbyggnaden definierar allt vi gör- det är den viktigaste och mest genomträngande av de förändringskrafter som vi möter. Kaikilla keskeisillä tutkimusaloillamme on jotain annettavaa tähän haasteeseen – ja hyvä niin, sillä haaste on suuri. Ekologinen uudelleenrakennus edellyttää jättimäisiä ponnistuksia, joista tärkeimpiin lukeutuvat uusien energiamuotojen löytäminen, kestävämpien materiaalien suunnittelu, globaalin liike-elämän dynamiikan uudistaminen ja elinympäristöjen kohentaminen.

Koska ekologinen uudelleenrakennus pitää sisällään myös muut vuosikymmenen megatrendit, sen täytyy kuulua myös kaikkiin oppialoihimme. Useiden tutkimusten mukaan ilmastonmuutos on nuorten suurin yhteiskunnallinen huolenaihe, joten tässä asiassa en koe puhuvani aaltolaisen opiskelijan vaan koko maailman nuorten äänellä. Being the university that educates game-changers we must be in on changing the biggest game so far: the fate of our planet.

A crisis is an excellent time to re-evaluate our basic assumptions. Are we going in the right direction? Focusing on the right issues? The crisis brought on by the novel coronavirus has given more momentum to the megatrends of the decade. It has put pressure on our economy while businesses the world-over have had to develop or even regenerate their business models in order to recover their revenue. It has made the EU revise its legal base in order to stimulate the European economy properly. Consumers have turned more than ever to shopping on the web, and millions of people have lost their jobs. The global economy is looking for a new direction, and a new focus will be found in the East. Being the only university in Finland which focuses on entrepreneurial mindset in its strategy, we have the ability to teach students and staff ways to apply our skills in ways that respond to the changing focus of the economy. Adapting new models starts with daring individuals.

We are facing a population that is ageing and becoming more diverse. A virus doesn't discriminate, but societal circumstances, living environments, a person's health, wellbeing and the capacity to use digital tools, are affected by their background, opportunities and habits. It is good to realize, that here in Aalto we are educating the people that will help overcome these obstacles by, for example, leading the change in management of Finnish companies.

Furthermore, several of our key fields of research focus on these issues. But what gives us the edge in ground-breaking research in topics of diversity is the internationality of our community. Being the most international university in Finland, we bring together people from different backgrounds in a unique way. People with nonidentical backgrounds is the solution for the need to look at research issues from discrete angles.

Even from a technology-point-of-view; While artificial intelligence is permeating everything we do, we need to take responsibility for how we are training the tools. Even though for example, a neural network itself is not biased, we need to make sure that the people working on their training datasets have a variety of experiences of the world. This all starts from the grassroots in the academic community, and that is why I could not be happier that diversity is encouraged in the Aalto community. In a world that is becoming more and more machine-oriented, brains with different ways of looking at the world are our most important asset. Aalto University can be a front-runner in building the scientific community that embraces its diversity.

With the megatrends, we are talking about such fundamental changes that, just like the trends themselves, we need to break down barriers and collaborate across disciplines more than ever. If there is one take-away from this spring, to me, it is this: no matter how well we predict the future, those predictions are as good as none if we, our communities and mindsets are not ready for any change. Today, I am more honoured of being an Aalto student and a member of this community than ever before. This year so far has tested our resilience, and we have passed with flying colours. Ottakaamme siis kevään opit syksyyn. Loistavaa alkanutta lukuvuotta 2020-2021 kaikille aaltolaisille.