

Hello everyone,

And welcome to Day One of the new academic year! Today marks the beginning of our 12th year as Aalto University. What a pleasure it is to welcome you all back once again to studies and work.

Autumn is an exciting time at the university as a new generation of students joins our community and starts a new stage in their lives. I want to wish an especially warm welcome to all of our new students!

### **We are on the right path: sustainability is the future**

My friends, when we renewed Aalto's strategy last year and thought about our long-term direction, together we agreed that sustainability is the future – and ours. While we've seen many signs that we're on the right path, our university's purpose was reaffirmed last month at the highest-level, with the publication of the United Nations report on climate science.

The IPCC report makes crystal clear that our future, the Earth's future, relies on the choices we make today.

We need research and research-based understanding, but complex problems also require out-of-the-box thinking.

To solve a crisis as big and complicated as our warming climate, the world needs radical creativity. The world needs people with an entrepreneurial mindset. The world needs people who see strength in diversity and are brave enough to create truly sustainable solutions.

In other words, my friends, the world needs more Aalto.

Whether it's developing totally new solutions or refining wide-spread processes, our community has rolled up its sleeves to do the work. From charting out the course to wood-based construction to refining battery recycling, we're on it.

Our university creates the knowledge and solutions that will help the world shift course, but we also spark the game changers of tomorrow.

### **We help society renew itself**

It is obvious that the challenges posed by sustainable development require a major reform of our society. What is needed for this change?

- We need skilled people;
- we need research-based knowledge;
- we need innovations, patents, start-ups and new businesses.

We are prepared to provide all of this as a driving force for social reform.

We produce an enormous amount of research-based knowledge and educate game changers and top experts. Last year, we applied for the fourth-highest number of patents in Finland. Approximately 70% of Aalto University's master's theses in the field of technology are written for companies. The ecosystem that has grown around Aalto is a fertile ground for new businesses – almost 3,000 of our alumni have participated in the founding of existing Finnish companies, and more than 1,500 high-technology companies operate in the Otaniemi-Keilaniemi area. These are excellent examples of the ways in which Aalto can help Finland reform.

Public investment is also essential if society is to renew itself. Public investment must be used to create internationally competitive competence and environments that, in turn, are able to attract private investments from around the globe. Only then will we be able to increase Finland's expenditure-to-GDP ratio for research, development and innovation to four per cent of GDP by 2030, a target specified in Prime Minister **Marin's** Government Programme.

There should therefore be every opportunity to mobilise investments to renew society. But, this is not the case. What is happening is the exact opposite.

Finnish research is being driven down, and the proposed cuts to the Academy of Finland's budget for research funding will especially affect young researchers and the future. Cuts to research are always cuts to education.

The threat of cutbacks is particularly striking considering that 95% of productivity increases are explained by innovations and education, as indicated by Professor **Matti Pohjola's** report. Are we really going to cut the opportunities of this and future generations?

To raise the level of education and ensure the growth of RDI funding, foreseeable solutions are required. A parliamentary working group appointed

by the Prime Minister's Office is currently looking for a long-term solution to these issues, a solution that will extend beyond parliamentary terms. I sincerely hope that the group will succeed in this crucial task for Finland.

Aalto University is prepared to assume even more social responsibility for degree education and lifewide learning in our key fields, as Finland needs more experts in these fields, namely technology, business and design. However, we want to also ensure the quality of education, which requires investment from society. I expect decision-makers to take responsibility on this issue as well.

### **We are finding our way through the pandemic**

As you know very well, the last year-and-a-half has seen fundamental changes to how we live, work, and study.

Dear Aalto community, you have all done incredible work over the last twelve months, and I want to genuinely thank you for that. Looking back, I am still so proud of how smoothly we transitioned to remote work when it became necessary.

Now, living in the midst of a global pandemic has been difficult – there is no way around that. And there is no doubt it has been hardest on the heart of our university, our students.

At a time in life when the world should open up to you, the world closed its doors. At a time in life when you need new experiences and friendships, you've been alone. At a time in life that demands fresh thinking, conversations have been stagnant. You've been on hold – and that's not to be taken lightly.

It's been a hard time for all of us.

But there is hope.

The best way for us to move forward, of course, is to get vaccinated.

According to recent news, the Finnish government is revising its COVID-19 strategy and setting a vaccination coverage target of eighty percent to drop restrictions and open society. It now looks like this could happen already next month, in October.

This change, in turn, will allow us to open campus and let's be clear: we want to have a dynamic campus, full of life.

But, while the pandemic has challenged us in many ways, it has also taught us important lessons about the benefits of remote work and study.

So moving forward, we will combine in-person and remote modes. Finding the right model – the right mix of in-person and remote work or studies – will take time. Which is why we will work together, in stages and learning from each other, as always, to see what works best for us.

### **Internationality is our strength**

My friends, as we start putting the worst of the pandemic behind us, it will be time to shift our gaze ahead.

When times tempt us to turn inwards, I think we need to do just the opposite. We need to open up even more.

Being open is crucial for driving our purpose of shaping a sustainable future and for our societal impact – both in Finland and internationally.

With students from more than 100 countries, and over 40 percent of our teaching and research staff from abroad, diversity and internationality is a great asset for Aalto, with huge untapped potential. This strength extends beyond campus through our international networks in Europe, the Americas and Asia.

Moving forward, we should also consider Africa, a region set to change higher education in the decades to come with its growing, young population.

My friends,

While the challenges ahead of us are big, let's not forget that so are the possibilities, when we meet them hand-in-hand. Together we are more than the sum of our parts. Together we are a community.

Let's remember that by taking responsibility, by taking on challenges with courage, and by collaborating across borders of all kinds, we can shape what's to come.