

**President Ilkka Niemelä's speech
Day One Opening Ceremony on 6 September 2022**

Hello everyone,

I want to wish you all a warm welcome to Day One. As we start a new academic year – the 13th year of Aalto University – I want to say a special hello to the heart of our community: our students. Whether you're participating for the first time or soon finishing your studies, I am so glad to have you, fellow Aaltonians, join us today.

This is actually the sixth time that I have the pleasure of opening the academic year, as I am now starting my second term as president of Aalto University.

Together we have seen so much.

The Otaniemi campus has developed tremendously over last years, with the Metro line unveiled in 2017 and since then new landmark buildings going up. All fields of our university now call Otaniemi home.

When the Covid-19 pandemic first hit in spring 2020, we went through a comprehensive shift to hybrid work and studies in record time. And as we were finally transitioning out of the pandemic last winter, Russia's invasion of Ukraine shocked us all.

I'm so proud of how Aaltonians have handled such big changes -- and turbulence. I want to take this moment and thank you all warmly for your excellent work and commitment to our community.

Return to campus

Now, I am so happy to see our spirit strengthening again, as we return to our beloved campus.

While this shared space is important for many reasons, let me be very clear: at Aalto we see the value of coming together on campus and we want to do our best to support it.

We have a large responsibility to support our students and help them get a firm handle on their studies. We also need to help them build their networks in the Aalto community and beyond.

Of course, we must recognise that our ways of working have, indeed, changed in some ways. Mixing in-person and online work and study is the present – and future. Moving forward, I want to make sure that we both recognise and take advantage of the best of both worlds.

Election themes

Importantly, the Finnish government continued to emphasise research and development activities and education in its budget proposal for 2023 put forward last week. The aim is to raise research, development and innovation (RDI) expenditures to reflect four per cent of the GNP by 2030.

While this is a step in the right direction, it does call for extra investments from the next government in order to realise the goal.

We are facing dramatic changes as we seek solutions to the major sustainability challenges, particularly climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

It is essential to allocate public RDI investments for sustainable development, provided that they leverage private investments, because most RDI investments after all come from companies.

R&D demands a high-quality expertise and experts.

The journey to four per cent would raise RDI euro investment by several hundreds of millions, of which more than half would go to expert work. This means that we need a substantial number of new specialists for the future.

The bottleneck for addressing sustainability challenges, sustainable growth and its concomitant RDI investment is actually a shortfall in experts and expertise.

And this challenge is best solved by investing in universities!

Investments in universities have the double effect of creating new expertise, research results and the discoveries necessary for sustainable innovation, as well as new experts who are so greatly needed.

How can we then speed up sustainable development, ensure our competitive edge internationally, while we take care of the well-being of citizens?

- We need internationally attractive hubs of excellence that bring in new experts and investments also from multinationals on an entirely new scale.
- To address the shortfall of experts, we need persistent contributions towards high-quality degree education for young people. The Finnish government's goal of providing at least half of all young adults with a higher education degree is a move in the right direction. Central to this is channelling the increases to fields and areas with long-term education needs and high demand. According to the latest Country Report of the European Commission, the Uusimaa region significantly lacks student spots.

- We also need a new way of thinking and resources to significantly strengthen the continuous learning of those already in the workplace, without making cuts to the degree education of youth.

We at Aalto University are ready to take up these challenges, and we are already doing a great deal. We are bearing a broader share of society's responsibility for degree education in our key fields and continuous learning.

A number of internationally noteworthy hubs of excellence have already sprung up around us, and they are genuinely competitive with the leading innovation ecosystems of Sweden, Denmark, the Baltic states and Germany in attracting new talent, investors and collaborative partners.

Building a sustainable future, however, requires long-term, continued funding.

Investment in universities is investment in the future.

Diversity

Fellow Aaltonians,

One of the things that I appreciate most about our community is our diversity. It's a strength we must cherish.

At Aalto, we believe in reaching across borders – not building walls.

It is open, global collaboration that makes research and education strong. It also acts as a strong current against destructive political polarization.

We need to remember that, just as Aalto needs top talent, so does Finland.

This country – and our university – need to be the kind of places where everyone feels they belong. We need to not just attract but retain the people that can find the solutions the world needs.

Future outlook

Now, we all know that the last few years have tested the systems and people of our planet but we also need to be realistic about what lies ahead.

It may not be a smooth ride. We already know that energy supplies may be tricky this winter across Europe, inflation rates are high and there is a real possibility of economically challenging times. The war in Ukraine may evolve, as well.

Make no mistake: despite all the recent turbulence, big global challenges have not disappeared. Our work to shape a sustainable future is more important than ever.

What recent times have shown is that we have the culture, values and stamina to deal with prickly problems.

Dear friends,

Let's not allow current uncertainties to make us blind to future opportunities. The challenges we face aren't just threats but they can force us to rethink the fundamentals – and they can drive transformative shifts.

As Aaltonians, we have the tools and insight needed to find sustainable solutions. Let's go out and seize those future opportunities together.