

President Ilkka Niemelä, Aalto University
Opening speech, 5 September 2023

Hello everyone,

It is so nice to see you all in person here today as we open a new academic year. Welcome everyone.

Aalto Day One is a milestone, one that I look forward to as it's the first chance each autumn for us all to come together. I want to express an especially warm welcome to the cohort of new students. We are so happy that you have joined us as new Aaltonians.

I would also like to extend a warm welcome to our 200 Jubilee alumni – you who embarked on your studies 50 years ago today. It is a great joy to have you here celebrating the new academic year with us.

One of the things that makes our university special is our ability to come together, from a wide range of backgrounds. As I look around, it's clear that Day One is a wonderful example of this. It's amazing to know that Aaltonians are gathered not just in this room, but watching the live stream all across campus. I can't wait to see that spirit of community throughout the year ahead.

Seeing our community grow and flourish is one of the things I'm most proud of. This summer Aalto came in as the top Finnish university in the global QS rankings. Earlier this year the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre also deemed our activities to be excellent – and we are the first university in the country to receive this evaluation across the board.

We are doing well, my friends. But someone might ask, what is our secret? What makes Aalto tick?

At Aalto we believe that different perspectives make us stronger. We know that reaching across boundaries makes us better equipped to solve the biggest challenges of our time. It's no secret that sustainable development requires transformational thought – we need fresh ideas that lead to totally new ways of living and doing.

Our inclusive culture, low hierarchy and commitment to equality are traits that have helped a world-class innovation ecosystem grow around us. It is an ecosystem that has attracted a lot of interest – and investment. IQM, Iceye and Relex all international companies that use technology developed at Aalto, together raised nearly 750 million euros just last year. We don't just educate students or offer opportunities for research, at Aalto we open doors to renew society and business.

Dear audience,

The new Finnish Government, which took office this summer, has stated, 'Finland's success and future growth are based on the work of skilled and creative people, high-quality scientific research and commercial innovations.'

For this task Aalto University was founded: to contribute to the well-being of Finns and Finland through research and education, while creating solutions for the grand challenges we face around the globe.

We need the best minds from Finland and the world. Aalto is a diverse and multidisciplinary international community that brings different languages, cultures and perspectives together. Together we are stronger.

I am very glad that the Finnish Government in its programme has committed to raising Finland's research, development and innovation investments to 4 per cent of GDP by 2030. However, this growth demands a sizable increase in RDI specialists – in other words, in the number of master's and doctoral graduates as well as international talent attracted to Finland from abroad. This shortage calls for concrete actions immediately. Universities Finland UNIFI -- the council of Finnish university presidents and rectors -- has already expressed its concern over the Ministry of Finance's proposed budget, calling it inadequate to be able to respond to these need to the levels required.

It is also important that public RDI contributions are allocated for sustainable development, especially the green transition. Research and expertise in arts, design and architecture play a critical role in the search for innovative systemic solutions to global sustainability challenges. At Aalto, we work at the cutting-edge of the sustainable transition and we want to make it happen with our partners. One excellent example is the Aalto University H2 Innovation Center, which will accelerate the transition to a sustainable hydrogen economy.

Dear friends,

To achieve sustainable development, we need the best talent from both Finland and the world. High-quality research and innovation are the result of diverse, multidisciplinary and international collaboration.

Together we are stronger.

The government's policies on immigration have understandably raised grave concerns in our community. The proposed restrictions are alarming in humane terms, and would undermine the high-quality research and education upon which Finland's innovation, sustainable growth and competitiveness are built.

Immigration policy must build international confidence in Finland as a stable, dependable society that invests in education and the future.

That's why Aalto has a clear message to the Finnish government: The planned restrictions on immigration, work and residence permits would lead Finnish society in the wrong direction. Diversity is a huge opportunity and resource.

My friends,

The new Finnish government's proposed changes to immigration policy and what they mean for the international community have caused tremendous concern among Aaltonians. I am also deeply worried.

I want to assure you that Aalto is taking every possible means to make sure that the proposed changes do not become reality. Just as different fields come together at Aalto, the fact that we have students from 117 countries and that nearly half our faculty comes from outside of Finland is only a strength.

As one of Europe's most international universities, diversity is a crucial part of who we are. This is why the public discussion has been so alarming. Let's add our voices to show how many of us believe in the power of people and ideas coming together.

Today, as the Finnish parliament opens and parliamentary debate begins, we are issuing a public statement. In it, we urge Finnish decision-makers to take a stand for an international Finland, one that fosters diversity and recognizes the value that it brings.

For those of you here in person, you will see the statement as you move towards the reception; the same message will also appear at the end of this live stream and across Aalto's social media channels. I encourage you to like or share the message.

One thing is sure: we are stronger together.

My friends,

What moments like this make clear is that we need everyone. And while each of us can make a difference, it's together that we can make real impact.

This holds true for current societal questions, like the ones we are standing up for today, and it holds true for the global challenges that have brought us here to Aalto.

The courage to take action for the well-being of all and the fierce belief that we do better together make up the Aalto spirit. As we open the new academic year, let's remember what we can achieve when we act hand-in-hand.