

*Speech, Opening ceremony of the academic year, 8 September 2017,
President Ilkka Niemelä*

Distinguished guests of honour,
Esteemed professors,
Students and staff of Aalto University,
Dear friends of science, art and education,

A warm welcome to Day 1 of the 2017–18 academic year, and to Dipoli, the new main building of Aalto University! Dipoli, built in 1966, was the first building to be jointly designed by Reima and Raili Pietilä, and it remains a radical and distinctive creation – as is the university that lives in and around it. Dipoli is a point of convergence where many basic Aalto principles come together in action: openness, vision, boldness and diversity, together with cocreation, pioneering spirit, encounters and community.

Dear friends,

It is my great honour and pleasure as the new President of Aalto University to inaugurate the new academic year. I assume my duties with great enthusiasm, but also with a sense of humility. As President I am privileged as a representative of this fine community to serve my turn bringing the university forward. My goal and my responsibility is to serve the Aalto community, and to work with determination for the long-term prosperity of Aalto University.

With the passionate work of talented people, it is possible to gain a place at the top of the international competition, and we have demonstrated this. A recognition of this was given by the influential QS World University Rankings assessment this summer, which ranked Aalto as the number one university in Europe, and as seventh best in the world at large in the category of new universities (under 50 years old).

In May another eminent evaluator – the Times Higher Education World University Rankings – raised Aalto University to its list of 55 up-and-coming universities for Aalto's innovative and global outlook, especially in the area of novel research funding and collaboration.

Success in the rankings is not, however, an end in itself, nor should it be the criterion to guide university activities. It is, nevertheless, evidence of first-class work and of the global recognition we enjoy. This is even more notable when one considers how the international competition has grown along with the rise of Asia, and grown more intense especially in the areas Aalto represents – technology, business and the creative disciplines. The thanks for these achievements belong to all members of the Aalto community.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As the 2017–18 academic year gets underway, the entire Finnish higher education sector is gazing intently at the future. Currently being planned by the Ministry of Education and Culture is a vision of research and higher education extending until the year 2030, while in the world at large, higher education is undergoing great upheavals. It is therefore high time we think

through what steps Finland needs to take in order to manage in this new environment.

Higher education is expanding at a record pace as it accommodates an ever greater share of the world's population who are eager and able to join the sphere of higher learning. At the same time, the mobility of students, teachers and researchers as well as the collaborative partners of higher education has increased to unheard-of levels.

The situation is without precedent and the rate of change is only increasing. The global competition between universities is giving rise to a new form of stratification: The best universities are building alliances with each other and forming networks, and the nodes of these networks are where scientific breakthroughs and radical innovations are occurring. They are also creating and offering the kinds of education that are in highest demand.

A guiding tenet of Finnish higher education and research must therefore be that Finland make a smooth transition to the forefront of higher education internationally and be a participant in the world-class networks of this scientific and academic community. To maintain its competitive edge, Finland must have hubs of competence and expertise that measure up to world standards in significance and strength, and that can participate as equals – or even leading figures – in the major international networks. Only then will it be possible to link domestic actors throughout the whole of Finland to the international frontlines of science, art, research and education, innovation and business.

The vision needed is one that evaluates all policy options from the perspective of how they will advance our undertakings in relation to higher education internationally. Higher education is a national investment that is critical for securing Finland's economic prosperity and Finnish well-being.

Dear friends of Aalto and members of the Aalto community,

We know the enormity of the global challenges before us – global warming, the need for sustainable materials and sources of energy, the healthcare needs of the aging population, the problems of urbanisation, and the changes in working life caused by robotization and digitalisation – and we know that these problems will require a greater share of our attention in the future. The institutions of higher education and research are expected to play a significant role in resolving these challenges, and in driving the societal changes needed to surmount them. This is our responsibility as well.

The solutions will require new kinds of systemic, multidisciplinary approaches. This is the end we have systematically worked towards at Aalto since the foundation of our university.

We have raised our profile dramatically in our seven key areas, and our ground-breaking research is visible on the world stage. We must continue this profile building, make choices and invest with boldness and perseverance, for this is the only way to achieve excellence on a world scale.

Digitalisation, with the transformations it has brought about, pose huge challenges for society. For players such as Aalto University, however,

digitalisation presents above all an opportunity. We shall continue to be a forerunner in developing the opportunities offered by digitalisation, benefitting from its great potential in education and beyond.

Aalto's role as a builder of the future and as a problem-solver involved in the major issues of our time depends on our cooperating creatively and free of prejudice with a variety of partners, both at home and abroad. The world's leading universities, businesses, and the public and third sector occupy a critical position in our strategic partnerships, while they also enhance the status of our local competencies and expertise. Finland's capital region has already achieved international recognition as a major hub of innovation. One of the main attractions to the region is the innovation community that has sprung up around Aalto. We will further strengthen Aalto's role both as a metropolitan hub of expertise serving the country as a whole and as a global nexus with connections going to the furthest horizons of research, art, education and innovation.

This requires us to substantially broaden our funding base. Future university funding will be based not only on state budget funding, but also increasingly on theme-based research programmes developed in concert with multinational research consortia, comprising a diversity of actors and funded by a variety of national and international research funding groups. For this reason as well, Aalto, with the strength of its key areas, aspires to a position of being in high demand among these world-class consortia.

Distinguished guests,

An important part of opening a new academic year is welcoming the new students into the Aalto University community. After all, building the future is impossible without the students, because it is people that change the world, not universities. This is why we place our students at the centre: by educating game changers, we pave the way for a better future.

It is mind-blowing to think that the students now starting their studies will have active careers well into the 2060s. Among today's honorary guests are alumni who started their studies in 1967 and have seen the changes that can take place in the working life over the course of 50 years. The alumni of Aalto University and those of its predecessors worked very hard to build a solid foundation for Finland. As we celebrate the centenary of Finland's independence this year, we celebrate first and foremost the people who built this society. I have no doubt that Aalto's current students will play at least as significant a role in Finland's success in the next 100 years.

Building the future is, however, more challenging than ever. The world is changing at an incredible rate: the developments in technology alone are enough to cause many familiar professions and jobs to either change fundamentally or disappear altogether. The students of today have to be prepared for lifelong learning and we have to give them the tools for that. The education we provide today must equip our students for the future.

Student wellbeing and ability to study is a top priority for Aalto, which is why we have already taken action based on the student wellbeing survey conducted last spring. Our starting point is that Aalto will continue to offer its students the best possible study environment as well as degrees that provide a solid foundation for lifelong learning.

We at Aalto University do not want our students to regard the University as a place they only come for a few years before starting their careers. Rather than leave the University behind them as soon as they graduate, we would like see our graduates becoming Aalto's partners for life. To this end, we have to make the University a place where our alumni want to return, whether to pursue continuing education or professional specialisation programmes, study selected study modules or even towards new degrees.

Continuing education is not, however, a one-way street. The Aalto alumni are not simply our clients and course attendees. With their invaluable experience of the world of work and its changes, the alumni help us redefine our core responsibilities to meet the needs of the future. They are a highly appreciated inspiration to Aalto students, personnel and management, and an integral part of Aalto's multidisciplinary and diverse community.

As part of our efforts to promote lifelong learning, we have also explored ways to expand our role to the education that precedes university studies. Our teachers and researchers were very inspired by their visits to primary, secondary and upper secondary schools under the Scientists in Schools scheme, while Aalto students, together with our collaboration partners, visited 1500 primary and secondary schools around Finland during the Tempaus

student project of last year. Furthermore, the School as a Service model, developed in collaboration with the City of Espoo has already brought two Espoo-based upper secondary schools onto Aalto University campus. This model promotes novel ways of learning and increases the joy of learning, and encourages collaboration and joint development efforts among the model participants. The upper secondary schools can make use of various special facilities and services of the university and their students can attend Open University courses, while the teachers can collaborate with their university colleagues. Next, we need to turn our attention to improving the level of fundamental mathematics and science skills acquired in compulsory basic and upper secondary education, and also identify and break down structures influencing girls' educational choices.

Dear friends,

We start this academic year at a time when major changes are shaking up the whole framework for our work, what we do and how we do it. Humanity's great challenges will be knocking at our door faster than we ever thought possible. Aalto University was founded in order to tackle these challenges and turn these global changes into new possibilities.

Now, after seven years of persistently building on the solid foundation created by Aalto's predecessors, Aalto University is ready to rise to the challenge. We have an ambitious strategy as well as a university community whose members, while committed to building an innovative society for the future, are also capable of great accomplishments today. To resolve the grand challenges of

our time, we need scientific and technological breakthroughs, and these do not occur in isolation from society or application development; such breakthroughs require design-driven communities of talented individuals who embrace new business models and seek radical innovations.

Aalto University's unique profile, open-minded culture emphasising entrepreneurship and multidisciplinary collaboration beyond traditional university boundaries, as well as the talent of our students, make us ideally positioned to take a major role in building a great future for Finland. To fulfil this potential, however, we need to secure a place at the international top, among those who actively seek solutions to the great global challenges. Together, we can build a sustainable future for our country and for humanity.

With these words, I declare open the 2017–2018 academic year!