

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
Rector Jari Niemelä

Opening address for the academic year 2019–2020 on 2 September 2019

Madam President, Mr Chancellor, your excellencies, dear members and friends of the academic community, ladies and gentlemen,

We are living in turbulent times. Global changes affecting humanity and the environment have been brought to the fore in the public discourse like never before. Young people are organising school strikes to solve the climate crisis, while one extreme weather phenomenon after another is making all of us worried. Many other revolutions, such as urbanisation, technological advances, health and income inequality, immigration, and political systems falling apart at the seams are posing challenges to stable societal development.

Science, education and universities hold a key role in providing solutions to these challenges. The University of Helsinki is capable of providing research-based knowledge to mitigate climate change, to engender sustainable urban development and to utilise artificial intelligence. Indeed, I wish to challenge society – and its decision-makers in particular – to cooperate with universities in solving these global challenges. Without scientific research we lack the sufficient knowledge base on which to found any solutions.

In addition to solutions, universities provide continuity and safety in the midst of great change. For nearly 400 years, the University of Helsinki has been building and educating this country. In times of societal upheaval, its role has been exceptionally important. Today, we are once again living in the midst of upheaval, which further highlights the importance of the University's mission. Universities must always be at the centre when building the future of our country and humanity.

Even though Finns trust in science and researchers, there are opposing forces in society calling science and our value base into question. We must remain vigilant and prepared to remind decision-makers and citizens of the significance of universities and their mission to provide education. Such defence of science has particular importance right now, as social discourse is characterised by half-truths, fake science and the belittling of science. In this age known as the post-truth era, universities' mission as integrators of society as well as maintainers of togetherness and solidarity is of the utmost importance.

Universities produce knowledge about human beings and educate us to value one another. Carrying the torch for education has always been the existential core of universities, but today its importance is heightened, as broad general knowledge forms the basis for a strong and renewable society. You could say that universities serve as beacons of scientific thinking, reflecting the light of education and defending the shared European value base, which comprises respect for human dignity and human rights, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law. These are entirely in line with the values of the University of Helsinki.

Alongside their educational mission, it is important for universities to offer direct benefits to society. Solid research produces results with commercial potential and research-based businesses, something in which the University of Helsinki has excelled in recent years. Our business

collaboration is strong and must be further advanced. Such collaboration must always be founded on sound ethics.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The transformation of studying and the acquisition of knowledge is challenging universities. One could question the relevance of universities in an era where information is sought online, from one's peers and through practical work. Degrees are said to become fragmented micro-degrees, or even nano-degrees, in the future; degrees that are microscopic compared to today's degrees, as the name suggests. The question is whether students wish to spend years pursuing a degree if they have the opportunity to acquire a micro-degree in micro-time.

What are universities needed for if students acquire their knowledge and skills in ways other than traditional studying? First of all, I want to unambiguously state that the University of Helsinki is not planning to introduce micro-degrees. Furthermore, I wish to stress that in an era of knowledge fragmentation, the educational attraction of universities is based on research of a high standard. The University of Helsinki has laid down a policy according to which teaching is based on research. This reliance on research separates university instruction from knowledge acquired from the internet or peers, or that based on personal experience. In addition, the University offers a communal study environment, as opposed to knowledge acquired directly online. The continuous demand for new skills and understanding of technology associated with the transformation of work is another reason why it is important to abide by this communal and educational mission of university education. Education based on research provides skills that will be important in the future, such as problem-solving and interaction skills, the ability to acquire and analyse information and to learn new things.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Finland's welfare is based on skills! Our current challenge is an ageing population of skilled workers and diminishing younger generations. This is why it is also important for universities to attract students and skilled workers from abroad. Universities are generators of skills-based immigration. The ambition is for many international students to stay and work in Finland after graduation. However, there are a number of obstacles on the path to employment, which is why I hope the transition to professional life will be made as attractive and smooth as possible.

When attracting international students and scholars to Finland, we are also obliged to support universities in developing countries that are starting from less favourable conditions. This is the global responsibility of universities, highlighting the sustainable development goals of the United Nations.

Universities carry a special responsibility in solving the crisis of learning prevalent in developing countries. In many of these countries, the quality of education has not improved, according to the UN, at the same rate as access to education. Pupils may spend years at school without gaining even basic literacy and numeracy skills. This results in division: one half of the world's children have access to a well-functioning education system, the other does not even learn basic skills.

Of particular importance is the education of girls and women in developing countries, as that promotes equality and women's access to better jobs, delays the average age of marriage and,

thus, reduces the number of children. In Somalia, for instance, as many as 95% of girls have never attended school.

Finland has achieved exceptional results in assessments of children's learning outcomes. And yet, education has not been among the central goals of our country's development policy. In fact, an enquiry conducted by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland proposes that Finland should strengthen its global status in solving the crisis in learning.

In the programme of Prime Minister Antti Rinne's government, high-quality education has been chosen as one of the focus areas for development cooperation. In addition, the government is drawing up a strategy for Africa. This is important work to which the University of Helsinki is contributing, bearing its responsibility for global affairs.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The University of Helsinki fares exceptionally well in international comparisons. Results from various rankings demonstrate that the University is maintaining its status among the top international universities. What is particularly pleasing is our University's 15th place in an international ranking assessing the promotion of sustainable development. For these great achievements, praise is due to all members of the University community.

To ensure the future success of Finnish universities, I proposed in my opening address at last year's opening ceremony contributions to science, education and edification. This message was perhaps heeded, as Prime Minister Rinne's government programme expresses appreciation towards universities. With the government bolstering our funding, we are embarking on the new academic year in an atmosphere more positive than in years.

I hope this positive atmosphere carries on, since transforming society and solving global challenges require long-term collaboration between various parties active in society. By providing knowledge for decision-making, the University of Helsinki wishes to be a solid partner in this work. Continuity also engenders safety and security for the University's staff and students.

At the start of the academic year, I wish the staff success in their teaching, research and public engagement efforts. Alongside your other duties, I hope you actively take part in drawing up our strategic plan in the autumn.

As for our students, I wish you enthusiasm for your studies – as well as for planning our strategy. In the midst of your studies, remember to take time for growing as human beings. Participate in solving global challenges, but don't let them darken your mood. Studying also involves joyful social life and networking. In this, take advantage of the subject-specific student organisations, the Student Union and student nations. And don't forget to make use of Think Corner and its programme of events to meet with others. Keep in mind that your coping depends on allowing time to recover from intensive periods of study. In other words, make sure that you spend enough time on hobbies and with student nation friends to counterbalance your studies.

Toivotan Helsingin yliopiston henkilökunnalla ja opiskelijoille hyvää lukuvuotta.

Jag önskar alla anställda och studenter vid Helsingfors universitet ett framgångsrikt nytt läsår.

I wish the staff and students of the University of Helsinki a successful new academic year.