

The transformational potential of universities in a turbulent world: The University of Turku in 2030

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Introduction

The University of Turku celebrates its 100th anniversary this year, 2020. Moreover, the university history and traditions in Turku started already in 1640. The City of Turku is the oldest university city in Finland. Consequently, we have solid and sound background and cornerstones for our University to set new goals—and to achieve them—in our scientific work and lifelong learning in the next century, too.

Sudden changes, however, may take place, as occurred this year. The COVID-19 pandemic appeared and negatively affected many organisations, communities and societies, worldwide and here in Turku and Finland. The pandemic has also hampered in many ways our 100th anniversary year and its festivities. However, we were very lucky to be able to run the main festive events at the very end of February, just before the pandemic broke out in March also in Finland.

The resilience and ability to recover from severe difficulties is the key to a successful future for any organisation, community and society. Universities especially are and have to be such organisations and communities of high resilience and good ability to recover and, very importantly, that can also help others recover and succeed. Universities provide us all with new, reliable scientific research results and educate new specialists to deal with current and future problems and phenomena. Moreover, their task is not only to deal with problems, but also to solve them in order to make Finland and world a better place to live and work, for all of us.

Universities, as well as other organisations, communities and societies, need new transformational knowledge and ability to function and succeed in a rapidly changing, turbulent world.

We need trust in open, reliable science

Even in these strange times of societal, political, economic and ecological uncertainties and risks, the majority of people still rely on science, research and education. On the other hand, perhaps it is precisely because of these uncertainties, risks and pandemics that we rely on science and research information. The Finnish Science Barometer has shown that Finnish people strongly trust in science, research results and information, and universities (Finnish Science Barometer, 2019). Unfortunately, negative attitudes towards higher education, research, and science are on the rise in Europe and to some extent even in Finland.

Reliable research information should be better available for decision-makers and it should form a solid basis for decision making. We in academia and at universities and research institutes still have not

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succeeded in this. Both researchers and decision makers are at fault. We all hope that the research advisory programme that is under development in Finland will improve the situation quickly and efficiently. Universities want to give their multidisciplinary input to the programme.

People talk about a post-truth era in terms of, for example, Brexit and the previous and current U.S. presidential elections, or recent developments in certain EU member states. However, in reality we have and will continue to live in a pre-truth era, as research continues to take us closer to the truth. Unfortunately, one fact is that universities' autonomy and the freedom of research as well as the status of reliable research information are being tested, in Europe and elsewhere.

It is clear that research has to be as open as possible. It is the starting point and a necessity for research. Open science also guarantees that everyone who is interested in research results have free access to them. According to the report by the Ministry of Education and Culture in 2019, the University of Turku is the best in Finland in the openness of science and research (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2019).

Lifelong learning is sustainable development

In the current and forthcoming turbulent times, a key factor and function in the transformational potential and ability of universities is to manage and take care of the growing needs for lifelong learning, from early childhood to people already in the labour market.

We have to be even more active, focused, and purposeful in this task to carry both national and global responsibility. We have to be capable and daring in choosing the right targets and methods. We have to pay more emphasis on sustainable development in all its dimensions and impacts. The sustainable development goals (SDGs) of the United Nations provide us with a good, useful framework. As an example of what universities can do to be true pioneers in sustainability and prevention of climate change is the strategic objective of the University of Turku to be carbon neutral by the end of 2025, and to publish the size of the University's current carbon footprint (University of Turku, 2018). Through research, education, and practical actions, universities in general can and genuinely want to advance their national and global responsibility and sustainable development.

Universities' strength lies in a thousand-year tradition and they have an important responsibility to promote research and higher education. The universities' two basic missions, research and education, are the source of genuine and extensive societal interaction and impact. The task and goal of universities is to secure and strengthen learning, both nationally and internationally. This lasting mission carries universities through centuries.

We as an academic community have to ensure that universities are seen and comprehended as institutions that create stability, responsibility, sustainability, as well as understanding and equality. Moreover, universities are institutions that stand up and thrive, even in the midst of great changes, as the defenders and promoters of well-being and learning. The world needs good and accessible education now more than ever.

Quality of research and education is decisive

What does the future have in store for universities in general, and for the University of Turku in particular? What do we know now, and what can we anticipate and predict for the future as a part of Finland, Europe and the entire world? The common goal should always be crystal clear: by strengthening the quality of research and education universities can maintain their significant and recognised position in the national and international academic community. Consequently, universities can strengthen trust in science, research and higher education, for the benefit of all of us. Universities, or societies as such, do not have any other option.

How can universities achieve this in the next decade and century? Universities have to be high quality, internationally recognised research universities, which proactively foster both well-being and a sustainable future. Hence, key themes are multi- and interdisciplinary research and education as well as internationality and collaboration. Universities have to create even closer and more productive collaboration within their own communities as well as with other universities and research institutions. Moreover, they need, and they want to, strengthen the regional, national and international collaboration with different organisations. Multidisciplinary approaches of universities have to be genuine and comprise concrete goals and tasks, not just remain empty phrases in speeches.

For example, at the University of Turku, our high-quality activities in research and education make us an even more dynamic and attractive partner to universities and research centres abroad and to other public and private organisations as well. Quality is the key and it attracts co-operation, both nationally and internationally.

It is good to remember that the internationalisation or globalisation of a university is not an end in itself but a means to improve the quality of a university's basic missions, research and education. Through them, the societal interaction and impact of universities will increase both in Finland and all over the world.

International cooperation in higher education: an example

It is normal and common to talk about and work in international cooperation in research. The same is not so common in higher education, though we have had, for example, several Erasmus exchange programmes in Europe. A big change, however, came when Emmanuel Macron, President of France, suggested in 2017 that the European University Initiative (EUI) enhance stronger European cooperation also in higher education (Marchard, 2017). Then, surprisingly, it took only some months to start the first call for the European University Networks (EUN), or Alliances (EUA). The first 17 EUAs were selected in 2019, and the second wave of 24 EUAs took place in the spring 2020. Then, the University of Turku, with six partners, received this European University status in the alliance of the European Campus of City-Universities (EC2U).

The European Campus of City-Universities (EC2U) includes seven universities from the Coimbra group: University of Coimbra (Portugal), University Alexandru Ioan Cuza of Iasi (Romania), Friedrich Schiller University of Jena (Germany), University of Pavia (Italy), University of Poitiers (France; coordinator), University of Salamanca (Spain), and our University of Turku. Moreover, the alliance has some thirty associates including eight student associations, seven cities, five regional authorities, three national agencies, two chambers of commerce, four science parks and one university association. We unite 160.000 students, 20.000 researchers, teachers and administrative staff, and about 1.600.000 citizens. (European Campus of City-Universities, 2020.) Quite an impact.

The EC2U Alliance has three focus points.

1. Versatile partners and stakeholders:

EC2U is a multi-cultural multi-lingual Alliance consisting of seven long-standing, education- and research-led, locally and globally engaged universities from the four European regions and seven countries. Its ambition is to develop an open and innovative space allowing seamless mobility among the universities and cities. The Alliance will reach this ambition by creating a pan-European campus, connected by a sense of shared European identity, and developing a smart higher education eco-system through a new model of quality education for an inclusive society. This original model relies on the double vertical and horizontal integration strategy, producing synergies from education, research and innovation, promoting formal, non-formal and informal education. The Alliance is based on a unique cooperation between universities and cities, involving academic communities, municipalities, regional authorities, socio-economic

actors and citizens.

2. *Sustainable development of universities and cities:*

The EC2U Alliance will promote an unprecedented challenge-based global initiative that leans on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs). Among the 17 goals, these seven universities have identified and selected three of them that will be guiding the Alliance activities during the first phase of its development: good health and well-being, quality education, and sustainable cities and communities.

3. *Future vision of a Pan-European Campus:*

After 2023, the successfully implemented activities will be permanently integrated to the Alliance portfolio and continuously expanded to other disciplines and challenges, thus affecting all internal academic communities and external partners, stakeholders and citizens. This long-term vision aims at reaching, by 2030, the status of real pan-European campus that delivers solutions to global challenges and empowers citizens to contribute to a more inclusive European society.

The EC2U Alliance strengthens the transformational potential and ability of these seven universities by and through (1) integrating governance and federal budget, (2) inter-university campus life with new physical/virtual learning and meeting spaces for students and staff, (3) joint European Diplomas and staff career plans with embedded/blended mobility, (4) joint Education and Research Virtual Institutes on the 17 UNSDGs, and (5) sustainable annual EC2U Fora between academia and citizens.

These European University Alliances have and will receive research funding from the Horizon framework programs. Hence, the important connection of research and teaching at universities is emphasised also in these EUA objectives and functions.

Building a strong and sustainable future in the University of Turku

The strategy of the University of Turku for the ten-year period of 2021–2030 is based on the University's basic missions in research, education, and societal interaction as well as on how we wish to impact our changing world, now and in the future, at least until the year 2030.

When we want to create and construct a strong and sustainable strategy, we want and have to do it together. Hence, this strategy is, indeed, a joint effort of our entire University community. It was created in an open process during 2019. With the goals defined together, we dynamically and responsibly build social well-being and a sustainable future for the new decade. Our staff and students actively participated in and contributed to, and directly affected, the process of building together the new strategy, our path to the future.

Social changes and global megatrends, such as climate change, digitalisation, and an ageing population, and now the COVID-19 pandemic, challenge us as we carry national and global responsibility. Universities are expected to have increasing scientific and societal impact, so we have to be able to renew our activities and be an international trailblazer. In a world built on connections, the significance of strategic partnerships and collaboration is increasingly important.

The University's role in producing information and competence as well as in upholding creative and critical thinking and learning is highlighted amid changes. We want to strengthen trust in science and increase the impact of research on society through open science, among other things. The University has to be ambitious in using research to discover solutions to the great challenges of our time. The experts we have trained for different sectors of society are in a key position to carry out the necessary changes. In order to respond to the needs of modern professional life, we offer flexible training solutions and opportu-

nities for lifelong learning.

The University of Turku is a high-quality, internationally recognised research university. We proactively foster both well-being and a sustainable future. Our values are: creativity, openness, ethical principles, critical thinking, and strong community. Our four strategic objectives for the next ten years are:

1. *We inspire unique learning experiences and outstanding learning outcomes*
 - a) The learning experience at the University of Turku is the best in Finland.
 - b) The University of Turku is a pioneer in lifelong learning.
2. *We cultivate an engaging and exceptional research environment*
 - a) The University of Turku has a strong and distinct multidisciplinary research profile.
 - b) We have an internationally competitive research environment for top experts and early career researchers.
3. *We are a proactive and dynamic partner*
 - a) We are a respected and responsible social contributor.
 - b) Strong regional partnerships make the University's operational environment unique and internationally attractive.
4. *We are an active expert community*
 - a) Our inclusive and equal community is committed to common values and goals.
 - b) We are a forerunner in the staff and students' digital competence and expertise.

In reaching these goals, our strength lies in wide-ranging multidisciplinary actions as well as in excellence and impact. Our ability to join our forces enables activities across disciplines and new initiatives in both research and education. We create an environment that promotes success together with the surrounding society and regional business life, of which the expansion of our engineering education is a great example.

All this is made possible by our active University community that values well-being as well as by strong internal collaboration and well-functioning everyday life at our campuses. It is true that the COVID-19 pandemic has had various effects on our research, teaching and studying since March 2020. At the same time, we have learned a great deal from these past six months of working and studying remotely due to the coronavirus. Continuous analysis and innovative development are important in order to create new, innovative ways of working, studying and social interaction.

In 2019, when we completed the new Strategy for 2021–2030, it was not possible to consider the effects of COVID-19. Neither was it necessary, as we are now already building the “new normal” for next year and, at the same time, the next decade. We are building a strong, resilient and sustainable future.

The University of Turku was founded in 1920 with donations from the Finnish people. Today, our 100-year-old University operates in a unique environment that fosters long academic traditions and active collaboration between higher education institutions. The University of Turku has a firm standing and a strong foundation on which we can build a modern, even more international research university with increasing impact in Finland, in Europe and globally.

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Author biography

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