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MESSAGE FROM THE VICE-RECTOR

We have been experiencing decades of fast-paced advancement in knowledge creation, innovation and technological development. This goes hand-in-hand with an unprecedented level of worldwide educational attainment. Yet, the challenges and the existing divides, at the global scale and within societies, have remained large. In fact, in some cases, they have even grown larger.

Climate change, geopolitical tensions, demographics trends and imbalances, income disparities, poverty, famine, forced or induced migrations and displacements, depletion of resources. All these shape, in one way or the other, our current lives.

To those issues, we may have an array of additional concerns, closely bound to research and to what we often call wellbeing: the frontiers on the use of genetics, the increase of energy consumption, the exploration of rare materials, overwhelming plastic and electronic waste, pressing cybersecurity issues, and the unknown impacts of the fast dissemination of artificial intelligence applications.

These are issues hard to overcome. Even more so as societies are profoundly asymmetric: there is a differentiated access to goods and services, including basic ones, often related to purchase power and individual status. These results in exclusion and in novel forms of exclusion, confronting the concept of an evolution towards a more just society.

Research, by itself, does not provide direct and easy solutions to those problems, as their nature goes beyond the scientific and technological arenas. Nevertheless, research across all domains has the power to shed a unique light over our world. It allows us to have a better understanding of the past, and of how the present came to be. It opens up windows into the future, into alternative futures, for us to decide upon, as individuals, as groups, and as societies.

Research enables an understanding across different dimensions, now more important than ever due to the high-level of interconnectedness and interdependence of man-made activities. Across space, from local to regional to global, from our University and neighborhood, to the city and the region, the country, and the world. Across time, from the now to the short thereafter, and into the future, moving beyond the institutional and the political governing cycles, reaching generations to be. Across organizational scales, from the single person, to different groups, to formal or informal organizations, public and private, accommodating for flexible and changing arrangements.

Across individuals, understanding their diversity and contexts, and caring for different needs.

Furthermore, through research activities, in all their variety, we have the ability to both go deeper, into each single subject, and to go wider, addressing relations and interconnections, blurring traditional subject boundaries.

This increasing pool of knowledge feeds, in turn, the innovation processes, which involve a much wider range of agents from outside the academia. The services and products resulting from innovation and technological development probably are the most visible impact of research on daily life. However, such impacts are much deeper and long ranging, especially when duly incorporated in education processes.

Furthermore, while collective decision processes pertain to the policy sphere, they should make use of the best knowledge available, and this includes a clear depiction of uncertainties and unknowns, and of widespread participation processes.

The Universidade de Aveiro, a comprehensive research driven university, is especially capable to make a significant contribution within this framework, as it has been demonstrating, once and again, over the almost 50 years of its existence. Its underlying matrix structure was originally designed to allow for customized and adaptable pooling of the best people and resources, to tackle ever-evolving research challenges. This premise is still valid today, and we must collectively make the most of it.

This is why it is so important to continuously nurture internal forums with no strict thematic boundaries, and to promote national and international networking, as all these foster creativity and may lead to novel research pathways.

This year, and within this line of reasoning, we have challenged the community to critically reflect on our contribution to inclusiveness, innovation, and the way forward towards more sustainable societies, through research as well as through action, setting our university as an example. Communities are made by their members, and we all have a role to play when defining the future we aim for.