

Dear students,

Dear colleagues,

Dear members of staff,

This day on our calendars was marked with an X indicating the opening ceremony of 2020-2021 academic year, which also coincides with my last year as Rector of the University of Bologna.

We will celebrate together and in-person as soon as life at our university returns to normal. I think I can speak for everyone when I say that all of us cannot wait for this to happen. We are all very impatient and eager to regain familiarity with those habits characterizing our teaching, research and administrative work, that now seem so far away.

Nevertheless, in my mind, it was important to meet this deadline by addressing all of you with a greeting that could replace, at least symbolically, the opening ceremony, which sadly, right now, cannot happen.

What drives me in delivering this speech is a heartfelt need to share with you some thoughts. Before doing so, however, I would like to thank all of you sincerely. Thank you from the bottom of my heart because, by doing your different but utterly necessary part, you managed to participate in the life of our University. Moreover, you have been doing so under these unprecedented circumstances that have been extending over a long period of time: from last spring through the hopeful glimmer of this fall until these last two months during which the emergency has risen again. An extended, hard and difficult period. During these times, we've been living in a state of constant emergency inside each institution and all over our country.

We have held on, we have fought back, we have risen to the challenges thrown at us.

Our achievements could not have happened without you; you who are studying, teaching and working in the administration. You really deserve to be thanked!

We owe it to all of you if our community still believes in its strong principles and continues to thrive.

We owe it to you, to the commitment and effort you bring to the table every day.

Firstly, I would like to address our students. You are the beating heart of the Alma Mater. You have continued attending your classes, studying, sitting exams and graduating. The number of newly enrolled students increased beyond our most optimistic expectations. This makes us extremely proud. However, we should not forget the hurdles that you had to face and are still facing. We, as University, stay true to and continue to uphold our position in support of in-class teaching, live interactions in classrooms, labs, libraries and at all our facilities. We need to meet each other in person. We all need it! We need to come together, to stay close, to exchange ideas and words. It is in classrooms that life at our University happens. These are the places where knowledge is created, ideas are generated and where the true core of our foundation lies.

Keep holding on, dear students! Now more than ever, keep putting your efforts into your education! Work hard as students, be engaged citizens, abide by those rules that are the foundation of our society and are engraved in your youth but spread to your parents, your families and relatives. This experience will leave a mark in your lives as students and, as witnesses of these times, you will remember them in the future. The memory of this period should not focus only on what you are missing now and therefore makes you sad. What you are missing today shall be paid back by your thirst for life and for moving on. Do not seek easier or quicker paths, as it is through hardship that we need to push ourselves harder. Demand more from yourselves, from your professors, from the people managing the University. Tell us what is not working for you, tell us what you want. Tell us about your ideas for the present and the future. We are here for you and because of you. It is your professors' duty to listen to you and support you.

And now to fellow professors and all the colleagues of the teaching staff. I am well aware of the difficulties you encountered, as I speak to some of you on a daily basis.

I shall not fall into the trap of easy dichotomies, that see two factions: against or in support of remote teaching. I don't think that it would do any good to any of us to tag along in this mediatic circus which entangles the whole country. By now, we all see the pros and cons of this teaching mode. However, I feel we still have a lot to achieve, starting from questioning our certainties and habits. We need to look ahead. We need to understand if and how what we have experienced in the last few months can be exploited and, if so, which new ideas will guide us.

Therefore, I address this request to you too: please nurture the dialogue with your students. This is especially important now that teaching activities are carried out remotely. Listen to your students, make them part of your decisions, involve them in your choices. Our inclination for inclusion, for listening and exchange, is what makes ours a great University. This has been our hallmark for centuries, since our foundation. We all know that being part of this University means bearing an added value and bringing it into our work. What we add comes from this century-old history that we cherish and put to good use.

For instance, let's think about all those daily actions that the pandemic has made impracticable, like going to our offices and labs or borrowing books from libraries. If we look at those actions now, we probably regard them as more valuable. Now that our normality has been disrupted, they are worthier to us. We should remember this when things will get back to normal.

Will we be different? Will our ideas about university, research and teaching be different? Predictions in these regards are pointless. If there has been or is to be a change, then it will be because of us and how we will exploit, analyse and digest this experience.

A special mention goes to all the women and men that crucially helped us manage the emergency, from IT technicians to security staff members who are on the front line every day ensuring that safety rules are followed. If our work was not disrupted, we owe it to all of them, to their commitment to making a smooth transition to remote working despite the many difficulties this entails for families and daily routines.

At present, managing our daily lives seems difficult. It feels like climbing a high wall. I know this is how we all feel, but I would like this to be a reminder to every student, professor and technical-administrative staff member: we shall not be broken by this emergency. On the one hand, we must be respectful of these rules. On the other hand, we must try our best to overcome this hurdle. We may often feel on the edge of a cliff, but we know that the moment will come in which doors that now seem inaccessible will open once again. When that will happen, we have to be ready. Let's use our mind and our imagination to look *ahead*, to think *beyond and creatively*.

Let's put our academic skills to use, let's look past what's possible and towards what is not there yet. In recent months, I've felt a great sense of community. I've felt it like never before. We bundled up in the name of culture and knowledge; in the name of our history and its memory that never leaves us. As a community, we are called to make important choices and we need to deal with change together. I am sure we will live up to our great reputation. I am sure every member of this community is aware how uniquely out-of-the-ordinary these times are.

And please let me use this occasion to repeat once again that I hope that one day Patrick Zaki will be with back to our community. I'd love to hear him say: I AM HERE!

It is with him in mind and in his name that I invite everyone to repeat what you heard in the video that was aired before this speech: WE ARE HERE!

And because we are indeed here, I officially announce the opening of the 933rd academic year of the University of Bologna!