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INAUGURATION

163rd ACADEMIC YEAR

TECHNOLOGY FOR HUMANITY

Inaugural address by the Rector

Donatella Sciuto



INAUGURATION 163rd ACADEMIC YEAR

“The Thread that Unites: Responsibility, Knowledge, and a Shared Future”

Madam Vice President of the Senate, Mr. Mayor, Mr. Regional Councilor, Civil and Military Authorities, Professor Draghi, Dear Rectors, Faculty, Technical and Administrative Staff, Students, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is an honour for me to welcome you to the Open Ceremony of the 163rd Academic Year of the Politecnico di Milano.

This moment invites us to reflect on our journey and on the challenges that lie ahead. It is not simply a matter of celebrating the results achieved, but rather of reaffirming the value of the responsibility that binds us: that of being an active community, a solid point of reference, and a driving force for social, cultural, and scientific progress.

At the heart of this community, our task is to interpret with clarity the needs of the present, anticipate the challenges of the future, and position ourselves as attentive and conscious mentors for the new generations. This is the message I wish to convey to you today.

“BETWEEN POLARISATION AND DIVISION: MENDING THE FRACTURES OF OUR TIME”

As a first step along this path of awareness and collective responsibility, we must not forget the lessons that history has entrusted to us. “If men were ever to lose the appetite for meaning we call thinking, they would lose the capacity for asking all the unanswerable questions upon which every civilization is founded.”



These are the words of Hannah Arendt, one of the most lucid interpreters of the century we have left behind. She taught us how the great evil of the twentieth century— “totalitarianism”—lay in the suspension of individual judgement in the face of hegemonic thought. She taught us that civilisation becomes fragile when it ceases to question itself. A lesson that still accompanies us today, in a different but no less complex era.

An era in which, according to the Global Risks Report of the World Economic Forum, **social polarisation** ranks among the foremost global threats, immediately after armed conflicts, extreme climate events, geo-economic contraction, and disinformation.

Social fractures and inequalities are perceived as the most profound perils, because they erode trust and weaken the sense of community. To cite historian Aldo Schiavone, our world is made of “subjectivities aggregated by subtle and shifting bonds, emerging in the wake of pressures that may change direction with the same inconsistent rapidity with which they arose.” And he adds: “We live in the age of ‘technocapitalism’ [...] framed within a myriad of impotent states, ‘custodians of irrelevant sovereignties’, devoid of intermediate social bodies.”

This is a powerful image describing, on the one hand, the fluidity and fragility of contemporary connections and, on the other, the inability of political and cultural institutions—including universities—to mend an overarching vision capable of giving meaning to the transformations we are experiencing. Hence the metaphor of the thread chosen for this inauguration.



What is missing is a logical, emotional, interpretative, and relational thread capable of holding together a fragmented reality that we hand over to the new generations: young people to whom we ask to interpret a complex present that we ourselves struggle to make sense of.

Universities around the world, and ours is no exception, have a fundamental responsibility: **to keep alive the exercise of critical thinking**, to mend fractures, and to weave a fabric that gives meaning to the future, particularly through the new generations.

Never before have we needed places for open, peaceful dialogue, rejecting all forms of violence. Never before have we needed free spaces in which to exercise our autonomy, far removed from autocratic logics. Never before have we needed to learn how to converse in a world in **“radical disagreement.”**

“This is a time of extraordinary disruption, in many different ways.” I borrow the words of Orla Feely, President of University College Dublin. Feely identifies six “D’s,” six disruptive forces shaping our age and profoundly influencing higher education and research.

D as *Division*: tensions that permeate our societies also reach our campuses. D as *Deglobalisation*: after decades in which the university was viewed as a natural place for international cooperation, we now see horizons narrowing. Geopolitical tensions and increased focus on security are redefining the rules of scientific collaboration. Then D as *Demographics, Deficits, and Distrust*: declining birth rates on the one hand, financial

strain and growing mistrust on the other. Finally, we reach the last of these six D's, the one closest to us: D as *Digitalisation*.

If in past few years we have looked at digital transformation, and **technological development** more broadly, with great enthusiasm... if we have considered it an extraordinary enabling factor capable of opening new frontiers of knowledge, today, in the face of the rapid rise of AI and the uncontrolled progress of "Superintelligence," the scenario has profoundly changed. The very progress that fascinates us also generates unease.

It is no coincidence that the World Economic Forum speaks of a "crisis of optimism," in which technology risks generating **new forms of polarisation**: echo chambers, information bubbles, and dual-use technologies become instruments of separation and, at the same time, of control.

It is in the Law of Accelerating Returns that a weak thought finds its ally: technological progress does not increase linearly, as Ray Kurzweil has explained. It does not happen "little by little." And in the absence of adequate theoretical capacity, the idea of the common good becomes increasingly fragile.

This is why "the revolution will be moral or it will not be at all" (Charles Péguy). This is why true transformation is not that of machines, but that of consciences; not that of systems, but of people. I therefore address our faculty and staff, our researchers, and our students, as well as the institutions and companies with which we develop research projects of high innovation and strong social impact.

This is precisely where the role of the Politecnico di Milano becomes central. Our **campuses**—Leonardo, Bovisa, and those in Cremona, Lecco, Mantua, and Piacenza are places of encounter and exchange, fostering creativity, collaboration, and collective growth. They serve as reference points for cities and regions, nodes within networks connecting local and global realities with which we interact daily. They are the thread that weaves together technique and ethics, research and society, innovation and culture, beauty and science.

Because the future is not something that simply happens: it is something that is designed and built together, reaffirming that sense of cohesion, optimism, and trust that fuels the progress in which we believe.

“GLOBAL CHALLENGES AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY: THE NEW STRATEGIC HORIZON”

It is on this foundation that the forthcoming 2026–2028 Strategic Plan is built, and it is in this context that I wish to convey a clear message today, highlighting several cornerstones of our vision.

First among these is the paradigm of **Science Diplomacy**: the expression of a technology increasingly central to decision-making processes and, at the same time, an extraordinary tool for dialogue and diplomacy among governments, institutions, and societies.

The Politecnico di Milano, Italy's leading technical university, through its research network and the work of its twelve Departments, positions itself at the heart of this new

science diplomacy, in the service of peace, development, and international cooperation.

Between 2023 and 2025, **more than 60 initiatives** related to science diplomacy and international relations have been consolidated. Cooperation and Development projects, particularly those aimed at African countries, have increased by 25%. We have strengthened eight long-term partnerships with **UN agencies** and received confirmation of the fourth renewal of the **UNESCO** Chairs established in 2012.

We are also proud of our collaboration with **ADA University** in Baku, inaugurated in the presence of President Sergio Mattarella of Italy, a clear example of how science and universities can serve as instruments of unity among nations.

Equally significant is the presence, here with us today, of the President of the Nelson Mandela Institution of Science, Technology and Innovation in Arusha, Tanzania. Our longstanding collaboration has recently been reinforced through the participation of eleven Lombard universities and the Lombardy Region itself, within the framework of the Mattei Plan.

These initiatives represent a commitment that we intend to strengthen further in the coming years. And while our gaze encompasses global challenges, it is equally necessary to ground these principles in the reality closest to us: **Europe**, our cultural horizon and shared identity.

Europe, born from Enlightenment ideals and aspirations, today finds itself reflecting on its fractures, weakened by persistent internal dissent; unable to confront with

determination the global challenges that see it relegated to a secondary role on the world stage, particularly in the scientific and technological domains.

In this regard, the words of Mario Draghi—whom we are honoured to host today—serve as a guide toward a unity of purpose that transcends “self-imposed limits.” We Europeans must reach a consensus on what this entails and act together without fragmenting our efforts.

It is precisely in response to this call for cohesion, and in an effort to help bridge the innovation gap highlighted by Draghi in his Report on Competitiveness, that TEF, Tech Europe Foundation, was established: an innovation district created through the collaboration of its founding partners (the Politecnico di Milano and its Foundation, Bocconi University, the ION Foundation, FSI, and the Chamber of Commerce of Milano MonzaBrianzaLodi). TEF aims to transform Milan into one of Europe’s leading technology hubs, creating an open environment where scientists, companies, and startups can collaborate.

One year on, the figures are encouraging: more than **50 researchers** supported, and the launch of two programmes: **TEF Ignition**, fostering project development among students, and **CDL Milano**, the Italian node of the global Creative Destruction Lab network, one of the world’s most renowned programmes supporting the growth of deep-tech startups.

TEF thus works to foster a true “culture of entrepreneurship”—a culture in which Italy still lags behind the rest of Europe in its ability to translate research into enterprise.



Looking at Europe from within, not as spectators, we are about to open a **representative office in Brussels** in 2026. As the leading Italian university and fifth at the European level for the number of funded research projects, we intend to contribute more decisively to the definition of continental priorities.

The next Framework Programme (2028–2034) outlines several areas of great importance: the more traditional ones (green transition, digitalisation, technologies for life sciences...) as well as a stronger emphasis on scale-up innovation and, crucially, defence and technological sovereignty, including the highly divisive issue of dual-use technologies.

Direct engagement with Europe makes even more evident the misalignment with the public universities funding system (*Fondo di Finanziamento Ordinario*), allocated annually, which proves inadequate for long-term planning and disaligned with international programme timelines.

These international programmes also highlight the central role of **education**, essential for safeguarding the spirit of cooperation that enables our students to become active participants in the global context. Only by maintaining strong connections between these dimensions can we create a virtuous ecosystem capable of attracting resources, talent, and opportunities.

Alliances such as IDEA League and ENHANCE allow us to foster collaboration among universities toward the creation of a “single campus” that speaks the language of

Europe, not of individual countries.

The **ENHANCE** project, part of the European Universities Initiative launched by the European Commission, works toward an integrated academic environment in which students, researchers, and staff can move freely, sharing resources and courses as if within a single institution, beyond national boundaries and the Erasmus programme.

Meanwhile, **IDEA League** distinguishes itself through excellent initiatives such as the joint PhD programme and the Challenge Programmes on frontier themes: sustainability, digitalisation, and artificial intelligence. We are no longer speaking of international mobility initiatives, but of the “internationalisation of the person.” The ultimate objective is to educate individuals with a mindset naturally oriented toward dialogue and exchange.

International attractiveness is the keystone. This year we reached **the highest number of international enrolments in our history**: around 9,000 (including more than 6,000 Master’s students, with Engineering registering a +4% increase), from 143 different nationalities.

This path began in 2012, when—despite regulatory constraints—we launched among the first Master’s programmes taught entirely in English. The time is now ripe for a further step forward: we are developing new Bachelor’s programmes in English to welcome an even larger number of students from around the world.

Beginning in September 2026, the Politecnico will offer three **new English-taught**

Bachelor's degrees, engineering-oriented and strongly multidisciplinary, following the same model introduced by the School of Architecture with the Bachelor of Science in Architectural Design: **Engineering Science** in Milan; **Industrial Engineering** in Piacenza; and **Process Engineering** in Cremona. In the field of Design, a new international degree will target the global networks of design thinking and cultural innovation.

Equally important is the strengthening of the right to education as a guarantee of inclusion and equal opportunity. The Politecnico currently supports 100% of the more than seven thousand eligible students, using €9.5 million of its own funds annually to supplement state and regional funding.

The next Strategic Plan will therefore include the creation of a **Youth Fund**, supported by private resources and donations, to fully implement Article 34 of the Italian Constitution, which states: "Those capable and deserving, even if lacking financial means, are entitled to attain the highest levels of education." Special attention will also be given to students from conflict zones, through dedicated scholarships aligned with our cooperation and science diplomacy efforts.

I would like to highlight the **UNICORE**—University Corridors for Refugees—project, through which we awarded nine scholarships for Master's studies to students from refugee camps. I also wish to note the collaborations with **correctional institutions** to offer tailored educational and support pathways.

These initiatives demonstrate our concrete commitment to an academic community that is increasingly inclusive and oriented toward sustainable growth, where the true



meaning of our mission is reflected in the courageous choices of those fleeing war; in the ambition and determination of those who grow up in poverty or hardship; in the dreams and aspirations of those who fill our classrooms and transform knowledge into future, and future into hope. It is in the intertwined lives within these walls, in the individual trajectories that cross and renew one another, that the most authentic meaning of our mission can be found.

“WHERE THOUGHT UNITES: THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF STUDENT COMPETITIONS”

Ultimately, the final word belongs to our students. This is why today we have chosen to express, through a powerful metaphor—**the international student competitions**—how proud we are of them all.

Student competitions, showcased today through several of their prototypes on display, perfectly embody everything we believe in: teamwork toward a shared goal; the acceptance and analysis of differing viewpoints; the management of disagreement and the valorisation of diversity; creativity and expertise; operational ability and a forward-looking mindset.

In these competitions, students challenge themselves directly, demonstrating not only technical competence but also open-mindedness, the ability to think outside the box, a sense of responsibility, and the capability to engage meaningfully with challenges.

We currently have **20 active competitions**, involving around **900 students** each year and engaging participants from all our degree programmes. Fields range from track racing to sailing, from technologies for disability to real-estate development, from



rockets to space technologies... from agricultural practices to urban redevelopment, from physics to business, from software development to algorithmic challenges, cybersecurity, and data science...

Competitions take place in **16 countries** across four continents and involve nearly **one thousand teams worldwide**. They are far more than simple contests.

I would like to extend a special mention to our longest-running team: **Formula Student**, established more than twenty years ago, in 2004, as a research project proposed by PhD candidates from the Department of Mechanical Engineering.

I also wish to highlight some of our most recent achievements.

The Polimi Sailing Team took first place in the SuMoth Challenge. With the prototype Teti, the team won: first place overall, first place in the design and manufacturing categories, and third place in fleet racing.

ACM Team Polimi won the award for best academic team in the ACM RecSys Challenge, where university and industry teams compete in the field of recommender systems (content-filtering software).

Equally impressive were the results of Trust Onrust team in the Students Reinventing Cities competition. Not to mention the world-class achievements, such as those of **PoliMove** at the Indy Autonomous Challenge, which once again confirms us as world leaders in autonomous driving.



Here comes the hope and expectations for new generations, capable of questioning and marvelling at discovery, of making responsible and thoughtful choices, unafraid of mistakes but eager to try, to surprise us with the vitality of their intelligence.

Above all, it is here that we find **the trust that they will be the ones to weave together what today appears scattered, to rebuild connections, meanings, and relationships**. Because the future is not a fate awaiting us: it is a thread that binds generations through the ideas and actions of those who choose to build it. And if that thread runs today through the classrooms, laboratories, and minds of the Politecnico di Milano—binding together our community of institutions, companies, and Alumni—then we can look ahead with confidence: **where thought unites, nothing is lost**.

Thank you.

Donatella Sciuto,
Rector of the Politecnico di Milano
December 1, 2025