

Opening Ceremony of Aalto University
Friday 8 Dec 2010

Prime Minister Matti Vanhanen

In recent times we have remembered Finland's history at the beginning of the two previous centuries. Those periods presented challenges and opportunities that Finland and the Finns readily accepted. Today Finland is an independent, modern country and a member of the European Union.

Internally those centuries meant the modernisation of the country, and such institutions as the Technical School of Helsinki, in 1849, the School of Arts and Crafts, in 1871, and the Helsinki School of Economics, in 1911, were established to promote this. In our century, too, modernisation is continuing around the world in the name of globalisation.

The humane general task of the Aalto University is to be involved in answering questions and opportunities, as – in the words of Alvar Aalto – “the technical culture” will have an increasingly wide impact on all civilisations, societies and natural environments.

The special task of the Aalto University is to contribute to helping Finland in this humane development as well as to succeed both internally and externally.

Finnish wellbeing is already based on the fact that 40 per cent of Finnish work competes on the international market. Succeeding in this requires Finnish companies to possess better and more significant knowledge and expertise every day.

The message of the Government's own studies and those of SITRA, the Finnish Innovation Fund, for example, has long been very clear. Finnish companies operating on the global market are compelled to acquire knowledge and expertise from the best places in the world. Our universities, therefore, must be able to answer the needs of global companies – if they cannot do so, then many companies' research activities will be transferred away from Finland.

It was to this challenge that President Yrjö Sotamaa responded in a new way in opening the academic year at the University of Art and Design Helsinki in autumn 2005. He proposed that three universities be merged into an Innovation University and emphasised at the same time the incorporation of art and design into innovation and business development.

This led to a broad discussion and preparations in different fields. Ultimately it led to the support of Prime Minister and two governments for the new university, for the simple reason that the project is a concrete response to the burning national issue of the conditions for existence in an era of globalisation.

Today we can sincerely thank the investment of business life and the driving force behind this, Mr Antti Herlin. For my part, I was convinced of the significance of the project for our country

particularly in two meetings, where presentations were given first by Mr Matti Lehti and Mr Yrjö Neuvo and then by Mr Antti Herlin, Mr Matti Lehti, Mr Martti Mäenpää and Mr Timo Kekkonen. Today I would also like to extend my warmest thanks to Mr Antti Kalliomäki, Minister of Finance and Minister of Education in the previous Government, as well as Ms Sari Sarkomaa and Ms Henna Virkkunen, Ministers of Education in this Government, and also to State Secretaries Mr Raimo Sailas and Ms Heljä Misukka and their working groups.

Thanks are also due to the presidents of the three universities Yrjö Sotamaa and Helena Hyvönen, Matti Pursula and Eero Kasanen, and to all professors, teachers, students and staff, for their open-mindedness. I strongly hope that this will continue during the implementation stage.

I hope, for example, that we can, in the same spirit, as quickly as possible start selling the Aalto University's high-quality education to students outside the EU, while at the same time also safeguarding in future opportunities for students from developing countries with the aid of scholarship arrangements. I gladly use this distinguished forum to state that it is time to abandon our allergy to selling Finnish education for term fees to students from other countries.

It would be wrong to say that the decision to establish the new university has been easy – significant sums in terms of public finances have been devoted to the project. The Government has implemented an extensive reform of the innovation system and the universities amidst understandable concern that one university would take the lion's share of all public resources.

The Aalto University is not, however, a national centralisation project, but a global regionalisation project from the world to Finland.

Every university, like the Aalto University too, has many vital tasks and every Finnish university has world-class projects which I encourage to network directly to the best experts in Finland and around the world.

Let's forget the old map projections that showed Finland located somewhere on the upper edge of the map sheet. Let's take as our perspective, like Nokia and Finnair for example, the real global map, which shows how advantageous our location is in relation to all the continents and their major centres.

It is also worth being aware of the fact that, due to climate change, the focus of logistics between Europe and Asia and of new natural resources will move towards our part of the globe. We have already started to receive good news: an information and communications technology research unit of EIT, the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, will be located on the Aalto University campus in Otaniemi.

This decision of EIT represents a good beginning in Europe, but let our goal be to become one of the leading global centres of innovation. The Finnish Government will play its part in promoting this development, and local government, too, should safeguard the everyday services this requires, for example in terms of language requirements.

The name of the new university encapsulates and expresses its essential purpose of deepening further the fundamental link between "technical culture", art and design. In this way, it is also a promise to renew the modern age in the spirit of Alvar Aalto.

According to Alvar Aalto, the task of culture is to humanise life and help technology to serve it harmoniously. In Aalto's view, a condition of this is that, amid the twists and turns of life, we are ready to doubt and analyse and to take as our universal yardstick the scale of the human being and his or her interests.

Such a humanising culture "is not a separate phenomenon detached from life, it must not be confined to the cultural sphere and life's special highlights; this culture is a thread that runs through all phenomena. The role of even the smallest everyday task is to produce a humane, harmonious result..."

With these thoughts of Alvar Aalto, I extend a warm welcome to the Aalto University on behalf of myself and the Finnish Government and wish it every success in serving our country and humankind.