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Speech by President of the Republic Tarja Halonen at Aalto University's opening ceremony at Finlandia Hall, Helsinki, on 8 January 2010

Aalto University's opening ceremony is an important event in the history of higher education and research in Finland. Three specialised universities that are at the top in their field in our country are merging to form a new and broad-based university. Finland gets a new type of science and art community.

Combining economics, art and design, and technical sciences opens up possibilities to see things with new eyes. Multidimensional cooperation can lead to better ideas and innovations more easily than before, but new challenges can also arise.

For Aalto University to be successful, a common path must be found: shared values and jointly agreed objectives. The new work community can provide a natural everyday network of cooperation, but this will not happen by itself. It will require the will and ability of all of you. The need for interaction is not limited to your own enlarged community. I hope that the interface with other universities, research institutes and business enterprises will grow in Finland and internationally.

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Education has long traditions in our country. Its goal-oriented development has benefited Finnish society in many ways. Our educational system is one entity in which all the parts should function well and support common objectives.

We are proud of our free-of-charge and high-standard basic education, which offers equal opportunities for children and young people regardless of social status, place of residence or gender. Finland's success in international education comparisons such as the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) gives us particular satisfaction. A strong basic education system creates a foundation for secondary and vocational schools, and all of these pave the way for effective higher education and research.

The setting up of Aalto University has received special attention in the university reform. The fact that it is run as a foundation and that business life has a stronger role in financing research and education has stimulated broad public discussion. Does money have too much power? The internal autonomy of universities includes freedom to conduct research and education, and this must be safeguarded in the future as well. Basic research and learning as such are important. They also create a solid ground for new innovations.

We all know that money - and a lot of it - is necessary for science. This is true for all universities and research institutes. Financial support is certainly welcome, as long as we remember that money is a good servant but a poor master. More generally, I wish that science and art were closer to people's hearts.

Equality between people requires equal access to education. It is also a key to success, especially for a small nation. Ensuring sustainable development in education depends above all on maintaining people's desire for knowledge and joy of learning throughout life. Lifelong learning increases people's ability to be masters of their own lives and respond to the challenges of a rapidly changing society.

In a global world, knowledge and skills become outdated faster than ever before. This places new demands on the development of education. We must find means to ensure that Finland continues to be successful in global competition. Meeting this challenge requires specialisation, but also broader education and knowledge cultivated by Humboldt-type universities.

More and more Finns are studying abroad. For us, it is equally important that students and researchers from other countries feel welcome in Finland. In this way, we can strengthen the international networks that are needed not only for Finland's success, but also to build a new and better world.

Learning new things and receiving education in the sciences and arts are central aims of humanity. Finland strongly supports achieving the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Meeting these goals requires especially a substantial increase in education possibilities on a global scale.

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The expectations facing the new university are high, especially given its own aim to belong to world class in technology, economics and art and design by 2020. I would like to congratulate all those who have taken part in creating Aalto University on their open-minded approach. I wish the entire university community the best of success in their work, which – according to the universities act – includes the mission to educate students to serve their country and humanity.