



Opening Ceremony of the Academic Year at Aalto University
Minister of Labour Anni Sinnemäki
1.9.2010

Esteemed President,
Ladies and gentlemen,
Dear students,

With the arrival of the chilly, damp autumn air, it is time to reach for warmer clothes and prepare ourselves to make new beginnings. You who are about to begin the autumn, and a new academic year, at Aalto may feel that you are stepping into the national spotlight. Aalto University is a new breed in the world of higher education. Both in Finland and abroad, this new creature has sparked debate and interest, perhaps even envy. Great expectations have been placed on Aalto University.

Bringing together scholars in engineering, economics and the arts may generate new creativity in a completely novel way. Aalto University must tear down the old barriers between scholars in engineering, economics and the arts. On the other hand, something new may also result from creative conflict, if such barriers are not lowered.

The development of the mobile phone market has taught us a bitter lesson. Top-level technology alone is insufficient; it must be supplemented with attractive services, excellent marketing and smart and attractive design. At its best, Aalto University could be a melting pot of competencies which, when combined, create something alluring and successful, that makes sense.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the keys to Finnish success is our high-quality education available to all. This education rests on one of the world's best comprehensive school systems. The Finnish system has the particular merit of making everybody learn and achieve at least fair results, thus providing equal opportunities. This helps to encourage our best talents to acquire a solid education, regardless of their background. Nevertheless, education tends to be "inherited" in Finland too. In order to avoid strengthening this tendency, I deem the principle of free higher education a vital element in the Finnish education system. Education should not be just about money. Free education also attracts foreign students to our country, accelerating the internationalisation of Finnish universities.

While we should stick to free higher education, much has changed in universities, and with good reason. Universities have been given more decision-making power over their finances and administration. This also enables them to define their focal areas and how they intend to compete in the national and international arena. Such freedom entails major responsibilities. At best, this new independence in the daily activities of universities will enable the building of successful research careers and provide better opportunities to attract people from abroad to work in Finnish universities. Our universities will also be better able to anticipate change, by redirecting their research focuses more rapidly than before.

New universities can influence their student-teacher ratios, or how individual their teaching is. Without a doubt, they are also aiming to improve teaching quality, by attracting skilled and inspiring lecturers to Finnish universities.

Working life places a multitude of demands on you, the students. It expects you to be social, networking professionals in your field, with good language skills. Although the labour market does not look very bright at the moment, the Government's economic revival measures have helped to prevent mass unemployment similar to that experienced in the early 1990s. Nevertheless, we have a large number of unemployed people with academic degrees. However, their situation is not hopeless. Unemployment has begun to decline and the number of vacancies is clearly increasing. Public authorities, in cooperation with potential employers, are assisting jobseekers in many ways: from guidance to start-up funding for new entrepreneurs. Even if working life places various demands on us, in the end everyone needs just one job and working life is full of perfectly worthy, everyday people.

In our funding criteria for universities, we aim to take the future employment of university graduates into consideration.

In Finland, it has been relatively rare for people with academic degrees to become entrepreneurs. I hope this tradition will change. I hope that many skilled, academically educated people bursting with ideas become entrepreneurs: perhaps entrepreneurs engaged in unbelievably fast growth, or communal, cooperative entrepreneurs. For some, entrepreneurship may be a lifelong career, for others a viable option for a certain phase of life. I am confident that academic entrepreneurship has much to offer Finland. In generating new ideas and innovations, the role of small and medium-sized enterprises is greater than their size would suggest. The strength of small enterprises lies in their agility, their flexible understanding of what the customer wants and needs. Enterprises also play a role in solving some decisive issues, such as combating climate change, and helping to build a renewing, materially efficient Finnish economy with inventive services.

Both promising business ideas and the need to solve societal problems call for new solutions, in a word: innovation. Without a doubt, Aalto University has excellent opportunities to become a top-level focus of innovation.

A short while ago, Bengt Holmström of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology wisely reminded us that limitations and scant resources are often the key to generating innovation. Why bother innovating if we have ample funds and resources anyway? Perhaps our aging population and higher energy prices will serve as spurs to innovation rather than threats. And perhaps innovations will emerge despite the fact that university funding is set to increase by EUR 150 million in 2011.

Looking back on my own years of study, I certainly learned most when different subjects and areas interacted and shed light on one another. Armed with hindsight, I would have supplemented my studies in Russian literature with courses in production economics. My advice to you, scholars in engineering and economics is: study art philosophy and slow, intelligent films. Artists: study marketing and engineering.

While I think that diligence and hard study is commendable, it is also necessary to pause for breath every once and a while. Bypaths are often useful and will not prevent you from achieving your goals. I hope that Aalto University turns out to be an institution made for taking such unpredictable bypaths.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you all a successful and inspiring academic year.