

Aalto Professor **Risto Nieminen**

In the cold January weather this year we convened in downtown Helsinki to the festive inauguration of Aalto University, spearheading the comprehensive University Reform in this country. Today we meet to launch the first full academic year of the new university – another memorable occasion, especially to the Aalto family.

In the remarkable build-up and launching process of Aalto University we have heard, said, written and read all the right words with positive connotations for a successful university: creativity, diversity, excitement, enthusiasm, passion, mobility, engagement, international cutting-edge, and so on. These are words that can and should be used as to describe what, how and why we do what we do. These and similar words dot our strategies and plans in striving for excellence.

Using the right words is of course not enough. The words have to put into action, and in this, as in most areas of human endeavour, the elements of success are 10 % inspiration and 90 % perspiration. There is no escape: we are facing many years of hard work to reach our stated goals, and the full commitment of the Aalto community, students, teachers, researchers, to these goals. We need the tools, sticks and carrots, to strengthen this commitment and of course the necessary resources, human, physical and financial.

How to define excellence and success ? How to identify and measure excellence ? Universities have many faces and roles: undergraduate and graduate education, research, outreach and societal interfacing. It is nearly impossible to define simple universal measure for a multi-disciplinary university, and obviously the merging partners of Aalto have different emphasis on the various aspects of excellence. I believe in diversity and dialogue, and in mutual respect and tolerance. Let us learn to be proud of each others' success, and discuss the defining features of various types of success.

However, as a passionate researcher I strongly believe that an excellent university is a research university. It is only through strong basic research that excellence is identified and recognized. Curiosity-driven basic research is our responsibility, and it is the major motivator for teachers and students alike.

Sir Nevill Mott, a Nobel Laureate in Physics, once said that “In basic research, second-rate class work is almost not worth doing”. This underscores the importance of quality, judged through open and critical review, in basic research. One cannot and should not hide behind the fog screen of fundamental research without being exposed to assessment and willing to outreach and dialogue with the society.

Opening Ceremony of Aalto University
Wednesday 1 Sep 2010



Throughout Europe and worldwide, universities are pushed towards adopting a more prominent role in translational and applied research, including innovation. This tendency should not be viewed as a substitute or alternative to basic research. Innovations breed on successful basic research. They can and should coexist and contribute to lively research environments. The road from basic research to applications and innovations is not linear but long and winding, with multiple crossings, dead ends, one-way and two-way streets.

The early days of Aalto University have involved organizational changes, strategic planning, administrative turmoil, and seemingly endless meetings. We know now much better where we stand. We are nowhere near the top of various research ranking lists. For education, the numbers are stark. In 2009, the present Aalto University with a student population of more than 20000, granted just 1567 Master's and 180 doctoral degrees. With a total budget of 356 M€, this puts a considerable price tag on a graduate, which implies serious questions about efficiency and commitment.

Thus there really is absolutely no reason for complacency. The work has only just begun, and it is important to keep the momentum. Winds of change are blowing, and this is the golden opportunity for a quantum leap. We are not alone: globalization and demographic changes have dramatically embraced universities worldwide, with consequences still difficult to fully grasp. We should be proud that Finland and Aalto University are at the forefront of this change. The question is, are we ambitious and hungry enough? I also believe that we have yet to fully define and optimize our interface with the other large university in the metropolitan area, the University of Helsinki.

A current theme in today's society, including universities, is branding, focusing the discussion more to packaging than actual content. This is obviously important also for universities struggling in the throes of globalization. Perceptions and images are important, but in the end it is the content that matters. This we should keep in mind.

I am enthusiastic and excited about Aalto University's prospects and potential. There is much positive feeling in the air, new dynamism and expectations, and emerging opportunities for renewal and recruitment. We have the societal acceptance and the political support. It is our responsibility to be worthy of that trust.

I salute the Aalto University community and wish a productive academic year 2010-2011.

Jag önskar Aalto-universitet ett framgångsrikt akademiskt år.

Tervehdin Aalto-yliopistoa ja toivotan sen yhteisölle menestyksestä alkavaa akateemista vuotta.