

Opening Ceremony of Aalto University  
Wednesday 1 Sep 2010



Tuula Teeri,  
President of Aalto University

Aalto University commenced functioning on the first of January this year. This means we are now starting the first full academic year of our new university, and welcoming the first generation of students chosen to study at Aalto University. The year 2010 has so far been quite exceptional. We have experienced both a “real winter” with plenty of snow, and a sunny summer hotter than any we have enjoyed over the last century. I hope that the long, hot summer has given all of us at Aalto the strength to resume our work enthusiastically through the autumn.

We have also been living through exceptional times at Aalto, building up the university’s organisational and management systems and starting to carefully implement the strategy we have planned together. I think that our feelings during this work have sometimes resembled snowstorms or heat-waves. Such a great change has affected us all, and everyone has needed strength, decisiveness, faith in the future, and the ability to support each other. I would therefore like to thank all of you who have been so dedicatedly and whole-heartedly involved in building Aalto University during its first few months.

Finland has chosen to invest in building a modern knowledge society by renewing and enhancing its university system. It is vital that we should single-mindedly continue this work, which is already well under way, also through subsequent governments’ terms in office. The establishment of Aalto University constitutes a crucial part of Finland’s strategy for strengthening the country’s research and innovation system. This is why I see Aalto University as a national project with an important mission to help drive the re-organisation of the national education system by having the courage to restructure, to share responsibility for building the future Finnish society, to contribute to Finland’s internationalisation and competitiveness, and to use its research and educational work to contribute to the well-being of people and the environment. In order to succeed in these undertakings Aalto University will operate in close collaboration with Finland’s other universities, with industry, and with the public sector, both in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and in the provinces.

By 2020 Aalto University aims to become a unique world-class university combining know-how the fields of technology, design and business. As a university we aim to invest greatly in high-level basic research, since we believe that this is the best way to build a platform for creating radical new inventions and innovations, and boosting Finland’s competitiveness. Our aim to become truly world class is ambitious – and to achieve this we will need the world’s best people. Some of our most important decisions are the choices we make when we select new students, researchers, teachers and other staff members. Our recruitment policies will largely determine the future of the university. Right from the start, Aalto University has invested in the establishment of

a tenure track system in line with favourable international models. The foundations of such a system are now in place, and the first recruitments will be made this autumn.

Besides focusing on excellence, Aalto University is building its strategy and values on the basis of strong commitments to sustainable development and social responsibility. Finding solutions to the Grand Challenges of today's world will require cooperation across borders. We must be able to engage the most capable minds; we must be willing to share knowledge and expertise; and we must be committed to building a better world. Finland's industries are already global, and now our universities must follow, without forgetting their national roots.

Aalto University is already well networked internationally, and our new strategy and our platforms for multi-faceted collaborations have attracted keen interest around the world. One concrete example of this is the establishment of an Aalto-style Design Factory at the Tongji University Campus in Shanghai last spring. In addition to research collaboration, extensive student exchanges are being planned within this partnership. A number of additional international partnerships are under preparation. At present the focus is on reinforcing collaboration networks with our Scandinavian neighbours.

Internationalisation means that we must invite and welcome students and researchers from abroad into our teams. We must also enhance the services we provide for foreign researchers coming to Finland and settling here. In this context Aalto University is actively collaborating with other bodies including the University of Helsinki. One concrete example of this work is the new "Töölö Towers" joint residential development, which was completed just last week, providing well-equipped apartments and related orientation services for the international guests of both universities, and for researchers starting work in Finland.

Preparing students to deal with working life and the challenges of the future is in many peoples' minds the most important role of a university. How can we best succeed in this task? At Aalto University we see students primarily as full members of our learning community, and not simply as recipients or clients for our teaching services. A university should genuinely care for its students, and invest carefully in improving its teaching methods. To support this work we are currently initiating a comprehensive evaluation of our university's teaching. Such commitments must be mutual, however, and our students will also be expected to take responsibility for their own studies, and to participate in building our university.

The active participation of students enriches and enhances the whole university, since students' fresh ideas often represent a welcome challenge to conventional concepts. One example of this is our rapidly blossoming student-driven Aalto Entrepreneurship Society, and its offshoot the Aalto Venture Garage. These developments have already given rise to dozens of new business plans that have been helped onwards. This idea has proven to be so inspiring that ten similar associations have already been set up at other Finnish universities, and their representatives met here at Aalto University a couple of weeks ago.

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Our universities are an integral part of the national innovation system, and they have to be able to share their expertise with other sectors of society in the right way. Aalto University's predecessor universities already had robust cooperation networks, and their unification has further reinforced this growing network. We are primarily striving to intensify collaboration by creating long-term, strategic partnerships, and by establishing new ways of working that will help our partners to get involved in our research already during the planning phase. Basic research, teaching and innovation activities all benefit from each other through rich synergetic interrelationships.

Finnish business life and communities have enthusiastically got on board to help develop Aalto University. The latest news today is that the Fortum Group has announced a contribution of three million euro to boost the university's capital. Fortum and Aalto University have additionally agreed to launch wide-ranging research cooperation in the fields of energy production, energy use and energy markets. Another significant partnership has been agreed with Tieto Oy. This cooperation will focus on the conversion of financial administrative processes and services to electronic formats, and on research into shopping by mobile phone and new banking and payment services.

These partnerships have been established in areas that have been precisely specified in Aalto University's strategy as comprehensive research focus areas for the whole university. The sustainable use of energy and natural resources, digitalisation and the development of the service sector, and the creation of living environments designed for people are the areas where Aalto University has the best chances of achieving world class status, according to our own evaluations. They are also areas where Finnish businesses see opportunities for future growth and success.

We are now celebrating the beginning of the new academic year here on our Töölö Campus. Our eight-month-old university is understandably still taking its first steps, sometimes quite literally. But I am nevertheless happy that we have got off to a great start. A lot of hard work lies ahead, but we have set off in the right direction.

I would like once more to give my warmest thanks to you, my dear colleagues, professors, teachers, researchers, students and other members of the university community – and wish you a positive and successful academic year.