

Education, research and innovations - Predicting the unpredictable
Yrjö Neuvo Jubilee Seminar 3.11.2020

HOW AALTO WAS BORN – MEMORIES FROM THE PREPARATION COMMITTEE
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Good afternoon Yrjö and all Yrjö's friends and colleagues! It is a pleasure to be part of his Jubilee Seminar.

The subject given to me is to discuss, how Aalto was born, especially the work of the preparation committee known as the Sailas Working Group.

I start with some background information.

Rector Yrjö Sotamaa, TaiK, University of Art and Design, Helsinki, proposed in his opening speech of the academic year 2005 a merger between Helsinki University of Technology, TKK, Helsinki School of Economics, HSE, and TaiK. According to Sotamaa, this kind of merger creating a new kind of university, an Innovation University, would be much more beneficial to Finland than the then timely proposal about a merger between the Helsinki Region art universities, including TaiK.

The Innovation University proposal attracted much attention and the rectors of the other two universities kept it worth further discussion. During the fall semester 2005 the Rectors created a very short preliminary draft about the basic ideas of the possible new university. We, the Rectors, even made a short trip to USA, to get to know Harvard and MIT as examples of top universities. We discussed, among others with Professor Bengt Holmström at MIT.

At TKK, the University Board discussed the Innovation University proposal on 12.12.2005. The Board was very critical, and the discussion resulted to a conclusion, that this is not the way TKK should go. The only ones for the proposal, as far as I can remember, were the Student Union representatives. The industry members of the Board, Timo Poranen and Yrjö Neuvo, shared the Board's negative feeling about the possible merger. It is, however, important to note, that the Innovation University was only a discussion point in the agenda of TKK Board. So, no official decision to reject the merger was never made.

Because of the TKK Board opinion, the Rectors of the three Universities, in early 2006, created a proposal for a common Innovation Institute, instead. The proposal did not satisfy the Ministry of Education, which at that time very strongly pushed the Universities of Finland to renewal and cooperation. The Ministry, at the end of October 2006, founded three separate working groups to promote university cooperation. One of the groups had to make a proposal for as deep a cooperation as possible between HSE, TaiK and TKK.

The Sailas Working Group

The Minister of Education nominated Secretary of state Raimo Sailas from the Ministry of Treasure, to chair the working group. The other members of the group were the Rectors, Eero Kasanen (HSE), Yrjö Sotamaa (TaiK) and Matti Pursula (TKK), plus the industry representatives Yrjö Neuvo and Matti Lehti. The secretary general of the group was Professor Turo Virtanen from the University of Helsinki. In addition to that, the three Universities gave secretarial help to the group.

Yrjö Neuvo had experience as a Professor, and as industry leader, and had chaired a Ministry of Education working group on the development of the engineering education in Finland. Dr. Matti Lehti was at that time also the Chancellor of HSE. So, both industry representatives had knowledge and inside experience of university administration and culture in general, which was very important to the success of the working group.

In the first meeting of the working group, I stated the points, which in my opinion, were the boundary conditions of TKK for a possible merger. In a nutshell, TKK is and will be, a strong research university. Therefore, we should not aim for and discuss about something called the “Innovation University”. So, the group, in its work, used the term “top university”. Yrjö Neuvo very much supported my views.

The basic discussions in the working group were in general positive. All the members tried to find solutions in the critical questions of the idea and principles of the possible new university. In my opinion, one very important additional point was the statement, that the new university is a national project, which benefits the Finnish society as a whole. Of course, some disagreements and delicate points existed, too. But they could be solved, like for example the question of the future campus structure, which was stated in a tentative form: the possibilities of Otaniemi Campus should be investigated.

Raimo Sailas chaired the Working Group with a neutral position and supported the goals of the merger. He took a positive view to the idea of the foundation based university, to the state share of the endowment capital and to the doubling the yearly state financing. He also understood the importance of the transfer of the facilities to the new University. I remember him stating, that he supports all these proposals, even though he knows, that his colleagues in the Ministry of Treasure will oppose them.

Yrjö Neuvo and Matti Lehti were active and constructive members of the Working Group. One important part of their work was to cooperate with the background group from the industry and to promote the idea of the industry share of the university capital and to estimate the possible amount of the industry donation. Their work was successful, as we know.

When the merger proposal in details was known, the Boards of all the three Universities supported it unanimously, at TKK on the 12th March, 2007.

Conclusion

From the above mentioned, we can see, that Yrjö was both active and important member of the Sailas Group. From TKK point of view he was a strong supporter for the most important goals of TKK, the creation of a strong research university with new kind of teaching and learning culture with students in the center. And his work in the background discussions with industry, and later on, with TKK professors have certainly been important in the process of the creation of the new university.

The Sailas Group work did, from the point of view of TKK and Aalto, result to another important action. Yrjö lived at that time in Tapiola, and very often we did travel to and from the Sailas Group meetings together in a TKK car. So, we could, among other things, discuss the meeting agenda in advance and afterwards. At that time, Yrjö was retiring from Nokia. Therefore, in one of those common trips from the meeting, I made Yrjö a proposal to join the TKK staff as a research director with special tasks to be defined later. This way Yrjö became again a member of TKK staff and among other things, the director of the MIDE research programme. In MIDE he again demonstrated his ability to create something new, like the successful Bit Bang doctoral course, and a flexible research programme with minimum bureaucracy.

To end up, as I stated, Yrjö’s immediate reaction to the Innovation University proposal as a TKK Board member was negative, but changed later, when the goals and boundaries of top university project, with his cooperation, were properly defined. Well, Yrjö was not the only one to hesitate. To your comfort Yrjö, I can state, that among others, Professor Bengt Holmström at MIT, did not see any real benefits in the proposal, when the rectors discussed with him in December 2005. And after all, he became a member of the first Board of the Aalto University Foundation. So, Yrjö, you were in good company!

Thank you Yrjö, and all the best for the future!