

Day One 2 September 2025 / Speech by President Ilkka Niemelä

I was excited. Maybe a bit terrified.

And for good reason: I had just left my hometown of Säkylä for good, after wrapping up my military service. And I didn't know anyone where I was going.

But on that day in September 1981 when I stepped on campus to start my studies -- right here in Otaniemi -- I knew my life was about to change.

Society in the 1980s was transforming: a new technology called the personal computer was up-ending how we did things, and what we thought was possible. Like so many of the people I came to know, I wanted to make the most of what was in front of me.

I wanted to be a part of the change happening in the world.

I see the same desire, the same excitement in the faces of the new students now starting their studies.

Today, as we open our 16th academic year, I have the pleasure of welcoming you, the new cohort of students, to our community as Aaltonians. There are countless new experiences ahead: from meeting new people, to attending lectures from top experts, to experimenting in the many labs and workshops we have on campus.

Life is full of possibilities.

It's a feeling I am sure many of the people in this room relate to, including the 200 alumni who started their studies with us 50 or 60 years ago, as well as the wide range of guests and personnel here with us today.

Tervetuloa, kaikki. Välkomna alla. Welcome, everyone.

As a new student, you have a ton of choices and possibilities in front of you. You're probably wondering: How can you find the right path for you?

I believe that learning how to learn is the strongest foundation for life we can build.

Education *really* pays off.

I know that when you scroll your feeds, it might not feel like it. We've seen a lot of news lately on how hard it is for graduates to find their first job.

But the long-term data is clear: a university degree is actually the best way to bolster your employability, and that remains true across good times and bad. When we look at the big picture, we see that higher education more than halves the likelihood of unemployment.

With a university degree, you develop skills and knowledge that will serve you for life.

While the outcome is important, of course, at Aalto we believe education is more than a degree. When I arrived on campus forty-four years ago, I had no idea that I'd make life-long friends or that I'd end up where I am today.

If there is anything I have learned over the decades, it's that curiosity and a willingness to jump in can take you far.

As one of our alumni, Supercell co-founder Ilkka Paananen has said, 'in some ways it's good to be young and not really know what's impossible. It's actually then that everything becomes possible.'

Nowadays things happen fast.

The strides being made in technology and other areas are unprecedented and our new students have the chance to be a part of this change. You, new students – who have just obtained your new student overalls, made new friendships, and maybe even have a new home – now have the power to decide: What kind of world do you want to build? What is your contribution?

It is the university's and decision-makers' turn to listen carefully to what you have to say.

Universities and decision-makers must ensure education keeps up with the times.

That's why at Aalto we are currently considering the creation of a new, multidisciplinary Bachelor's programme. The students in this programme would study technology, art and business, deciding only mid-way which field they'll graduate from. In this way, we would ease the pressure on youth to choose the right field from the beginning, and at the same time we would educate broadly thinking Aaltonians for the needs of society.

Right now, Finnish society making its way through an extremely difficult situation: the productivity of work has not gone up as hoped and economic growth has been at a standstill for more than a decade.

However, the situation is not so grim across the board. One of our emeritus professors, Matti Pohjola, has analysed Finland's growth challenges in different industries. His report shows that

Finland is in fact experiencing strong growth in certain industries, such as deep tech and information technology.

Aaltonians are contributing strongly to this, and many of these growth companies originate from Otaniemi. And the pace is ever increasing: the combined value of firms founded by Aalto alumni is more than 30 billion euros, and these firms have created more than 15 000 new jobs.

We need the same kind of spirit of reinvention and growth for all industries in Finland.

Helsingin Sanomat recently did a story on a report by the consulting company McKinsey, whose report examined critically the low growth targets of Finland's large companies and their timidity to invest in research and development. Companies are now evading risk.

If more industries were to renew their operations boldly, our economic outlook would be brighter. All of us, as members of the Aalto community, can contribute to this much-needed change.

In difficult times like these, where we need to help our growth-industries in reshaping Finland, I am following very closely the Finnish government's budget negotiations for the next year. They are underway as we speak, and our next speaker, Minister of Science and Culture Mari-Leena Talvitie, might be able to give us an update on the negotiations.

In its Government Programme, the Finnish government has set the important goal of increasing the share of higher education graduates among young adults to 50% – after all, Finland has fallen significantly below the OECD countries' average level of higher education attainment among young adults. Universities aim to meet this goal by increasing their educational capacity. Providing high-quality education to all students up until their graduation requires teaching staff, space and facilities. To achieve those ends, we need a more stable financial outlook.

Despite this, the government already agreed last spring to cut the universities' core funding – the funding used to implement education – over the next several years. The cuts are already taking Finland further away from the government's goal of boosting the country's rates of higher education attainment. I appeal to the leadership of this country: As research and education are the building blocks of our future, Please let us not cut their funding.

I want to stand up for the work we do here, because I see the value that research and education bring to the world.

Dear Aaltonians, I want to thank you all for the meaningful work that you do each and every day on this campus.

To our new students I want to say, that there is so much potential ahead as you, our new students, also become part of Aalto's story.

When I started my studies, I knew I wanted to be part of the change happening. Along the way I came across so many fascinating trails that I could have explored. One, however, caught my eye and I decided to dive into the unknown. Four decades later, that niche topic of the 1980s can be seen in our everyday lives: artificial intelligence is, indeed, transforming our world.

You may choose to take on a different challenge – this, after all, is the time to find your own path.

If there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that learning to learn will help you navigate whatever path you find yourself on.

As you continue forward, let yourself be curious and don't be afraid to jump in. It's in ***that*** moment when the impossible becomes just a little more possible.