

Dear honored guests, present members of the student body and Aalto faculty. I am Sakari Ropponen, the presiding chair of our dear student union and would like to wish you a wonderful new academic year as part of the community that forms Aalto University. For that reason, I would like to take this moment to speak about our community here. And in that vein I would like to ask you all a question:

Who is considered a member of Aalto University?

Not student, serviceperson, nor professor – who is a member of the university?

Depending on who you ask one might suggest this to be our professors and researchers – graduates of the university and active contributors to furthering knowledge in Otaniemi.

It would be then natural to also include other senior academics in leadership roles and employed students in course assistant roles.

That's a fairly good representation of the university to the outside world. The people responsible for released articles, scientific papers, new methodology, creations and teaching to those attending.

What about supporting staff? Those not actively participating in teaching, research or organization thereof? Do they count?

Many of you may have noticed I didn't mention students yet. What about students? Are they true members of the university or simply temporary attendees? If not, do they become members after their graduation or just become alumni?

I think most present here and online would agree that all the aforementioned groups are a part of the entirety of what a university is, but I would say they are also what constitutes *the* university. They are what constitute the university community and as such are *members* of the university.

Some of you may be questioning my choice of words now, as it may be a little arbitrary to discuss such semantics, but I think there is an important distinction in the thought there.

People get to know the people they spend time working, studying or having fun with. It is natural for students to spend time with and primarily know each other and for professors to be acquainted with their research groups, peers and faculty they interact with. The same is true for anyone anywhere in the university. The overlap between peer groups is what makes for a community.

It has been proposed that the number of members that any cohesive group can be comprised of is at most 250 people. Both the intake of students and growth of numbers in faculty have served to grow the distance between groups of this community. It is my thought that students serve as the glue between layers of the university, helping create the community between the more disconnected groups and bringing everyone together around the joint task of educating yet another generation.

This is to say students play an integral role in bringing cohesion to any given school here at Aalto. In interacting with all faculty – teaching, research and otherwise – they are the ones that have the task of integrating into and forming a group identity again and again here at Aalto.

With an incredulous number of fellow freshmen to get to know, vast subject associations beyond, and the whole of Aalto community on top, it is no wonder that for many finding a place to belong can be difficult. On top of that, the many associations have largely met a

saturation point long ago. These frameworks have largely lost the space for meaningful participation from a number of their members and nearly all associated researchers and professors.

It is one thing to make this observation, but does it matter? We do not need to return to the past, but we should think of what is possible in learning from it. It would still be valuable to have places where students interact with research groups, PhD students and professors in their free time. Places where students, through discussion, can find further interests in their studies, consider signing up as course assistants or even join research groups.

I am at the end of my studies now and have only studied under the school of electrical engineering, but with my limited view I can at least say one thing for sure: we have an abundance of shared study spaces, but spaces wherein it is possible to expect to find peers or seniors in association to your own studies are few and far between.

“A university community includes the university’s teaching- and research faculty, other faculty and students.” I wanted to write a speech merely on this line as it is etched in Finnish legislature, but after all this perhaps I can end with a thought: I’d like to encourage all our faculty to invite students to your office and breakroom, make them feel welcome to build a community with you in addition to their peers.