

Speech at the opening ceremony of Aalto University academic year  
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Your Excellencies, Distinguished President,  
Distinguished Managing Director Matti Vanhanen  
Dear invited guests, professors, other members of the academic community and  
above all, dear students

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the great German philosopher, wrote in his diary: “The education of the individual requires his incorporation into society and involves his links with society at large.” These words are also true of the institutions giving the individual his education, particularly in the case of higher education. A university mirrors the society around it and universities can only be developed within that society’s context. Finnish universities have the privilege to strive to become world class universities in the unique context of the Finnish welfare state.

Finland is at the top of the world. Time after time, we act bashful after earning pole position in one ranking or another: Finland has been ranked the world’s most competitive nation and the least corrupted one, as well as the one that takes care of and educates its citizens the best. Helsinki is among the most fun places in the world to live in. You would think that these things would be easy to enjoy and even be conceited about, but no, quite the opposite.

When we are not afraid of losing the AAA credit rating, we are busy throwing in the towel over what happened to the Nokia mobile phone business. Finland dropping down a few places in the PISA study was a national disaster. In university rankings, we are eager to be measured by indicators set by others while forgetting our own strong points. Finland is at the top of the world in almost everything else but self-esteem.

When you are at the top, moving forward is hard: there is no safety rope to cling to and no-one’s lead to follow; you have to boldly make your own way. Finnish universities and society must build their future on identifying their strengths and making use of them; when you are at the top of the world, copying from others is a step backwards. The Finnish universities must do what Finnish society has done: to move from copying from others to leading the way; this takes good self-knowledge and self-confidence.

The strengths of the Finnish higher education institutions include close cooperation between the university, the business world and the rest of society, as well as having students with initiative, a tradition springing from vivid student associations. Aalto University has gained international acclaim for being an emerging top university in business/academia collaboration and having a start-up culture born out of the activeness of its students.

Developing these unique strength requires ensuring that the tightening economic situation and the university funding model do not encourage universities to put their own interests before those of society. The universities must have the patience to guarantee that their education is of high quality, even if the indicators only rewarded them for speed and quantity. What is more, the very foundation of our equal education system, a free-of-charge education, cannot be compromised in the hope of gaining additional funding. It is free-of-charge education that guarantees the future competitiveness of Finnish society, as it allows the most talented young people—whether Finnish or international—to receive an education regardless of their financial standing and to stay here to help build an even more competent Finland.

Similarly, society cannot forget the promises it has made to the universities. The future of Finland is based on high-level competence, which in turn, requires sufficient resources. The universities' mission—to serve the country and humanity—is increasingly important but requires sufficient support from society.

The change in the economic structure, digitalisation, and the fragmentation of work demand changes in the relation between universities and the rest of society. The responsibility of the university cannot start at the first year of studies and end with the student earning a master's degree.

The boundaries between a student, researcher, entrepreneur, an alumnus and employee are becoming blurred although at the same time, they are being actively reinforced.

The world has an ever-increasing number of top universities whose graduates are dogmatic over-achievers, mass-produced hit products of the industrial era. The strength and future of Finland is based on freedom and responsibility, which allows us to educate competent individuals who succeed in the global competition and produce added value to society both during and after their studies. Rather than being a degree and publication factory, the university of the future has to be a driving force that continuously caters to the needs of society.

While the role of the university is expanding, it is not alone in its task. One key element of the university tradition is peer learning taking place alongside formal teaching: transferable skills are learnt through work in non-governmental organisations; students produce ambitious projects and create cross-disciplinary networks and overall, challenge themselves and take responsibility. Peer learning cannot happen, however, if no room is left for it. Engagement in student activities does not threaten studies but complements them. The skills needed for the future are learnt in a network of studies and student activities, as employees and entrepreneurs, and for that, we need a common will and mutual understanding.

Distinguished guests, the grass is not always greener on the other side of the fence; we can only develop through identifying our own strengths. So why not stop peeking over the fence and engage in some navel gazing instead: what am I good at, what are we good at, and how can we be even better together?



On behalf of the Aalto University student union, I wish you all a very constructive academic year.