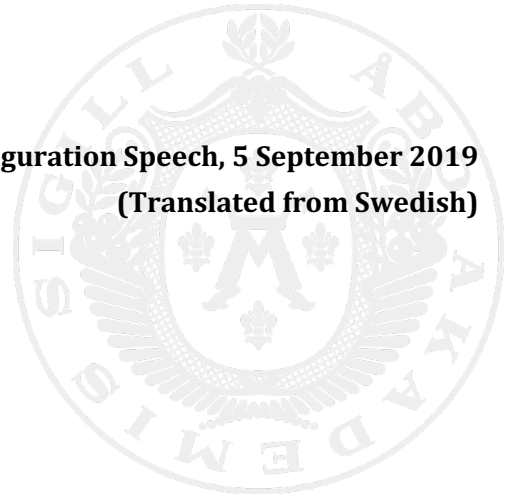




**Rector Moira von Wright's Inauguration Speech, 5 September 2019
(Translated from Swedish)**



Chancellor, Your Excellencies, Fellow Rectors, Students, Members of the Staff at our University, distinguished guests and colleagues, dear friends of Åbo Akademi University.

I.

Today, we are celebrating the opening of the autumn term 2019. Around 5,500 students and 780 doctoral students are starting or continuing their studies at our university. I wish you cordially welcome! I also would like to congratulate all newcomers for getting a study place at Åbo Akademi University, which has so much to give in terms of knowledge and learning environments, both national and international, as well as social and cultural life. Hopefully, you will be proud of Åbo Akademi University – your future *alma mater*. Slightly over 650 teachers and researchers, and almost an equal number of other members of staff have also gradually occupied their offices, laboratories, libraries and other campus facilities. Many are already fully engaged in their work. Some are attending the festivities in Vaasa and Turku to celebrate the opening of the term and the inauguration of the new Rector at Åbo Akademi University, the 18th in order.

Professor Mikko Hupa is presenting the Rector's insignia to me. At the same time, he is handing over a university that is bubbling with activities and burning to further develop into one of the most prominent universities in the Nordic countries and the most attractive Swedish-language study and work place. There is a strong will to make Åbo Akademi University to prosper in all its glory. Our four profile areas are *The Sea, Minority research, Molecular process and material technology* and *Drug development and diagnostics*. These areas are successful, but they do not cover all our operations. Perhaps we should further profile our university so as to clarify our task and motivate our presence. A profile area connecting research and education would also showcase our integrated and innovative ways of working within these core university functions.

The uniqueness of a university resides in its pedagogical form, as Jan Masschelein puts it. Today I am going to deepen three key aspects of the university. First, the *location and discursive space* of Åbo Akademi University. It is partly inherited, partly a product of an ongoing making and remaking of the world. Second, is "that thing called thinking" – *systematic scientific thinking* – and how we use it to develop our unique pedagogical form and new knowledge. Third, I want to focus on our *students*. Without students we would not be a university. However, the reason is not (only) that students are learners. Rather, the reason is, that the students are an integral part of the process where teachers/researchers develop their knowledge and thinking – also from the very important *ethical* point of view.

II.

Our campuses in Turku and Vaasa are a visible part of the town, partly because of the beautiful old architecture, partly because of the modern buildings rising proudly in the cityscape. Those of us who are interested in history are intrigued by the idea that General Governor Per Brahe saw the educational potential in the eastern part of the Swedish kingdom and had the Royal Academy established in Turku in 1640, during the reign of Queen Christina. The statue of Per Brahe near the Cathedral of Turku reminds us of the fact that the town already at that time had a rich business and cultural life. After the Great Fire of Turku, and due to political reasons, the university was re-located to Helsinki to become the Imperial Academy of Helsinki and, later on, the University of Helsinki. Nevertheless, the topos of the Royal Academy of Turku – the place, tradition and experience – still remains. With its two universities, four universities of applied sciences and 40,000 students, Turku is a unique, multi-language city of education, an extremely vital and dynamic location.

Already when the Royal Academy was established in the 1600s, Turku was an important meeting place between the East and the West. Thanks to the active contacts across the Gulf of Bothnia, the region of Vaasa also served the same purpose – albeit on a smaller scale and without the major impact of kings, bishops and noblemen. Vaasa has a long history in the field of education. A primary school, known as the Pedagogium, was founded as early as 1641, to be followed by a secondary school, the Trivial School in 1684. The region is alive with educational initiatives and academic activities driven by the four universities and two universities of applied sciences and around 17,000 students.

It is natural for a university to grow and expand, also through the integration of scientifically successful activities into the university. This is how, for example, teacher training in Vaasa has become to be a part of Åbo Akademi University. At this point, we must not forget Novia University of Applied Sciences, which operates under Åbo Akademi University. Within our university group, we will systematically strive to strengthen the collaboration in terms of infrastructure and management, and we aim at both making the study paths more flexible and enhancing synergies between research and education.

It will not do full justice to the dynamic nature of Åbo Akademi University if we only look at buildings and external aspects: the academic profession is not materialized in technology, glass or concrete but it calls for many other lines of professional knowledge as well. The essence of a university is captured in the knowledge and learning that are generated within the university, that is, in the texts, innovations, arguments and seminars springing up. In the questions asked, in the thriving curiosity. We are working over the long haul, advancing on a rough road, but rarely racing with the clock. As the poet Tomas Tranströmer aptly puts it: "Time is not a straight line but rather a labyrinth." (*Tiden är ingen rak sträcka utan snarare en labyrint.*)

This is true for our university, both within research and education.

Outsiders are often critical about the academic world, wondering what we actually are doing and if we are of any use at all. We may be so focused that we come across as being confused, we may be so provoked by a wrong conclusion that we explode, and we can go on for hours discussing a matter that seems utterly irrelevant for others. Natural scientists are sometimes blamed for being detached, and especially those engaged in the humanities are increasingly often questioned if they are contributing anything at all to the real world. My hope is that I will be able to put at least some of the misunderstandings right. Namely, the fact is that what we are doing within the university can only be done here, within the academic context and the atmosphere of open, critical and rational discourse – the topos of the university.

III.

What exactly are we doing within the university that is so unique and indispensable? What are we doing that could not be done elsewhere as well? Is it the research?

Research is a profession, but research also involves developing previous ideas and knowledge, borrowing – sometimes unconsciously even stealing – others' ideas to improve, reject and elaborate them, reading – and thinking. Research is evaluated internationally, but researchers and their results are truly tried and tested during teaching as they are challenged by their students: Does the reasoning make sense? Is the chain of thoughts valid? What other perspectives might there be?

Indeed, it is not only the research but also teaching, education and thinking that are indispensable. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons (2012) argue that the uniqueness of the university resides in its pedagogical form, which comprises simultaneously the following three aspects: research, education and making of the world, that is, the formation of new values, knowledge and artefacts.

The academic thinking is characterized by *sensitivity* (*inlevelse* in Swedish, *herkkyys* in Finnish), the ability to identify and distinguish something in the constant flow of events that is worth reflecting. It may be a hastily drawn causal conclusion, a rough generalisation, a simplified assumption to be challenged, or a provocative problem to be solved.

Another aspect is our *inclination* (*fallenhet* in Swedish, *taipumus* in Finnish) and readiness to make an effort to profoundly reflect on an issue, regardless of whether we are driven by curiosity or by an established habit of thinking.

The third aspect related to the thinking developed within the university is the *ability* (*förmågan* in Swedish, *kapasiteetti* in Finnish) to think *effectively and sustainably*. It may indeed result in actually bringing about alternative explanations to something that has for long been taken as granted, such as an assumed causal relationship.

Taken together, the three different aspects of thinking enable us to develop knowledge and education as *academic understanding*. Successful academic understanding is characterised by a fine-tuned interaction of the general and the details, and is applied with deliberation and ethical reflection. This is an ability that every student should have acquired by the time they complete their studies – if our university is to be called *alma mater*.

Alma mater is our Mother Knowledge, the seat of our learning. *Alma mater* also refers to the tradition of the broad knowledge nourished by the university. Presently, *alma mater* is tasked to overcome dualities and gaps. Already before the disciplines started to differentiate in the Western world, many feared that the division between religion and science would lead astray. Today, we are facing societal challenges so great that we cannot afford to stick to quarrelling about the right way. We need to collaborate and broaden our own education to be able to assume the required viewpoints that will enable us to contribute through our knowledge to the survival of the mankind.

IV.

Åbo Akademi University will not stand by and watch the society change. Being the Swedish-language university for the entire Finland, we cannot content ourselves with providing educated civil servants and professionals to meet the needs of the Swedish-speaking population, but rather, we must aspire higher.

In our future strategy, our aims are set high: to be the gateway to Finland for the Nordic countries and to attract students from all over the Nordic countries by taking the student perspective seriously both in terms of form and contents. What should we do to achieve these high aims? I am convinced that we need to create *a new story* about Åbo Akademi University as the Swedish-language university for the entire Finland. To succeed in it, we need to discard the currently dominating way of thinking where languages are identified with certain groups and where groups are set in opposition. Our new story must take shape in a forum other than where politics based on identity and division are formed.

We need to establish internal meeting places and a functioning and listening management as well as provide support for activities where support is needed, or even surprise with new and smart solutions for teaching facilities and libraries. We need to restore trustful relationships between various disciplines within our university. We must reinforce that which is good, and intensify the connection between higher education and research. We also must, through sophisticated deliberation and ethical reflection, *continue* to do what we already can and do.

Students' questions and enthusiasm are challenging our university to develop. We must not think that the student perspective would be a disastrous error. I do not mean that students should be the measure for evaluation or the focus of all attention. On the contrary, to think from the students' viewpoint means that we, regardless of where we

stand within our university, ask ourselves: How would I understand this if I were a student – which I am not!

Hannah Arendt has described this perspective as “Thinking and judging where actually I am not!”

One way to deal with the matter is simply to talk with the students and invite them to participate. Starting this autumn, students will have their representative included in the Rector’s Executive Group. This may sound self-evident, but it has not been the case before.

V.

What exactly are the next steps Åbo Akademi University should take on its tortuous path towards being the Swedish-language university of Finland and the gateway to Finland for the Nordic countries, I do not know. Our Vice-Rectors Mikael Lindfelt and Stefan Willför and I myself are looking forward to meeting, discussing and making plans together with the members of staff, the Board, the University Collegiate Body, students, regional collaborative partners, neighbouring universities and sister universities in Finland and abroad, and across the stakeholder borders.

Today, I have drawn borderlines for what a university is and is not, what Åbo Akademi University stands for and what it does not stand for. Borders must not be completely wiped out, differences must be allowed to exist. Finally, I would like to end by quoting Tomas Tranströmer:

“A border does not set apart, it is the meeting between the external and internal.” (*Gräns är inte särskiljande utan mötet mellan utanför och innanför.*)