



Rector Moira von Wright's Speech for the Opening Ceremony of the Academic Year, 3 September 2020



Dear colleagues, students, and friends!

The autumn term has begun and, to everyone's delight, we have been able to watch our new students walking about the campus in small groups. This has brought life to the university, which has been largely silent and deserted over the past six months, ever since we closed our doors in Turku and Vaasa last March. All of you—our researchers, teachers, administrators, students and partners and other essential people around us—have done a fantastic job of making life easier, whilst doing your part to stop the spread of COVID-19. Electronic entrance exams, online examinations, lunch webinars and planning meetings – all of this has become part of our new normal, a reality we could not possibly have foreseen just one year ago. For this, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to you all!

Thanks to your bottomless ingenuity, we were able to keep our strong academic discourse going: students finish their courses and researchers add the finishing touches to their articles, just like in previous years. Our digimentors and educational developers perform miracles when it comes to introducing the organisation to new working approaches, and our IT experts quietly appear with cameras and microphones to record lectures, speeches and discussions, which are then shared on our internal and external networks. I am proud of your technocultural erudition!

But, the pandemic is not over yet – we will have to go on living with the uncertainty it brings. The practical arrangements for studies, instruction and research might change in a moment's notice. We must all be prepared for such an eventuality. We must all maintain social distancing, practice good hand hygiene, perhaps wear masks, respect quarantine recommendations and never come to campus if we feel at all ill.

However, despite the COVID-19 restrictions, Åbo Akademi University has made some key strides over the past year, thanks to all of you! We have received several large research grants from the Academy of Finland, EU and other prestigious funders for areas such as history, political science, cell biology, and environmental and marine biology. We have also received Erasmus Mundus funding for international and joint master's programmes as well as donations for professorships, just to name a few of our successes.

The new building under construction on Henrikinkatu in Turku (Aurum) should be ready to house several of our activities and projects by the end of this academic year. In Vaasa, our section of the Tritonia library is moving to Academill and will contribute positively to the academic environment here.

We have just signed a new agreement with the Ministry of Education and Culture. The agreement includes both our expanded educational task and the individual strategic undertakings we are expected to contribute.

Last year, we jointly introduced Åbo Akademi University's new strategy, which defines four focus areas for the coming years: Gateway to Finland for the Nordic countries; Academic quality; Open, inspiring campuses; Working place of the future. The strategy contains a number of encouraging sections for planning the academic years to come. But, allow me to highlight a topic that, up until now, has perhaps not been at the forefront of discussion. It is Bildung.

We call ourselves "a university close to the sea". Being close to the sea embodies the idea that most Swedish-speaking Finns live along the coasts of Finland - we live off, of, for and on the sea. Our research can, in a broader sense, be considered relevant to the sea and the future of the Baltic Sea in nearly every respect.

But, what about Bildung then – this is the point I want to make. What does it stand for and why are we dusting off such an archaic term and including it in a strategy that stretches ten years into the future?

Previously, when talking about Bildung, people referred to a specific erudition and ability to carry oneself in a social context, but at Åbo Akademi University, we are applying a more critical definition of the concept. We write, for example, that we must have "dimensions of Bildung in every aspect of education", that our students must develop a universal academic literacy, that we should be inclusive and able to reflect upon and adopt different perspectives. We believe that the Bildung we offer and represent does not only refer to the preservation of our cultural heritage, but rather to developing it in such a way that Bildung addresses our ability to appreciate something without wanting to personally possess it – to interest ourselves in others and in things that are novel and perhaps alien to us.

Bildung also refers to our ability to deal with the interface between humans and nature, between humans and technology. Bildung is not a timeless ideal. Although its content has changed over the past centuries, it has always sought its inspiration from the concept of a prolific and creative person. And, Bildung has increasingly come to dealing with the issues we face in daily life, the challenges we are tackling here and now.

"The cry for erudition gets its power from the confrontation with specific challenges that arise in real historical situations," says Kristensson Uggla. Digitalisation, social distancing, internationalisation and global change are examples of specific, concrete challenges we are being confronted with today. They constitute the backdrop against which we will develop meaningful plans for and thoughts about Bildung at Åbo Akademi University.

In addition to the challenges posed by Bildung, we are also facing economic challenges. We know that the Finnish economy has been made vulnerable by the restrictions brought about by COVID-19, which will, in turn, lead to economic ramifications for our own operations. A fundraising campaign for Åbo Akademi University has been launched. The state will match all private donations made to the university during the next two academic years. We are hoping for a successful fundraising campaign and welcome a dialogue with everyone who would like to support Finland's own Swedish-language, multidisciplinary university.

I would like to especially welcome those of you who are new at Åbo Akademi. And to those of you returning from your holidays, welcome back! Partners and friends – welcome to follow and co-operate with us! I wish you all a stimulating and safe new academic year!