

From: Degree Students of Aalto University who do not speak Finnish

To: Student Organizations of Aalto University

Dear representatives of Aalto University student organizations,

Recently a discussion between the KY Board and a member of the International Degree Student Committee (IDSC, placed under AYY Board) about the involvement of non-Finnish speaking students in student organizations in Aalto University triggered conversations within the community of degree students at Aalto. As a result, we, Degree Students who do not speak Finnish, are writing this open letter to all the student organizations in Aalto University for the three following reasons:

- 1- Define clearly “International Degree Students”
- 2- Claim why we need student organizations by our side
- 3- Explain what we believe should be done by these organizations

1- Define clearly International Degree Students

This letter is signed by International Degree Students of Aalto University. So that everyone has a clear understanding of what an *International Degree Student* is, we claim that we are students just like all the national degree students. The main difference is that we, usually, are not fluent in the Finnish language. Ideally, we think that there should be **no distinction** between foreign students and Finnish students that have chosen to pursue international programs with English as their study language.

Despite what many think, not all of us came to Finland only to take advantage of a free education; some came because of the quality of life, others to develop Finland as a country – just to name a few reasons. This means that we naturally face different challenges and have different interests than exchange students, who are here for only about four months. We will live in Finland for at least two years and normally come here with perspectives of working, **continuing in the country**, and eventually becoming part of the Finnish society.

We live in Finland, normally as recent immigrants, and face several related challenges. The main ones touch upon social habits, labor market integration, and some other daily related issues. It is difficult being an immigrant anywhere, and with 19% of the parliament comprised of Basic Finns, it is no easier in Finland. That being said, we really hope that in Aalto we can achieve a more “international friendly” environment.

Now, before you conclude that the solution to our problems is to organize international parties and international career events, please keep on reading.

2- Claim why we need student organizations by our side

We truly believe that in order to offer the best return on investment for the Finnish tax payers sponsoring our education in Finland, our university and mainly our student organizations should facilitate us in two main topics:

- a) **Integration with Finnish Community.** If Finland really wants us to continue in the country after our education, joining the labor force later on, there is no better way than through the creation of social ties with the local community. Currently – in most student organizations – orientation weeks, trainings, parties, sistsit, speksis, trips, excursions, events in general, have the bad habit of separating Finnish from foreign

students. They normally name the separate event with the word “international” in front of it – which unfortunately means that there will be few Finnish students present in the event.

We believe this to be a bad habit because it encourages foreign students to avoid mingling and integrating with their Finnish peers, and facilitates creating even stronger bonds within the international student community – people that are in the same immigrant condition – which forces a lock out between Finns and foreigners. Since each one of us came to Finland for a different reason, the formed group gets extremely volatile, with little chance of remaining in the country after the studies, without much social contact with the local community.

- b) Labor search.** As we all know, you at the guilds, subject clubs, and interest clubs are a main connection between Aalto University students and potential employing companies. Given our immigrant conditions – not knowing where to search for work, the work searching culture, application habits, etc. – it becomes extremely hard for us to find a job in Finland. While with the Finnish education degree, for most of us, it gets much easier to find a job at our home countries. Since we are willing to avoid that, it is key for the Finnish economy that student organizations would help us, foreigners, to get a position in the labor market.

3- Explain what we believe should be done by these organizations

We believe that solving these problems mentioned above is not a dream and can actually be achieved by tackling two very simple actions:

- **Provide comprehensive information in English about all the events, all the existing clubs and societies through all the communication media, regardless of the language in which the event will be held.** We see it as an essential step towards internationalization. The rationale behind this is simple: as soon as foreign students know that an event is happening, they will be interested in joining. Otherwise the events will remain solely Finnish forever.

We know that most of you will argue that you have no money to pay for translators, but we all know that not only do Finns in general possess a relatively high level of English, but that everyone involved in Aalto student organizations has satisfactory English skills and is able to write an English version of their marketing call for events or happenings.

- **Enable and encourage non-Finnish students to join clubs, organizations’ boards and committees.** The discouraging message that new students get during the first week of their studies is usually as follows: “we have this great club X, but unfortunately the language of all activities and meetings is Finnish”. As consequence, international students are discouraged to even try being a part of the active Aalto student community. Thus, we feel that the message above lacks the following very important phrase: “but you are welcome to join, and we will see what we can do”. As soon as the clubs themselves are willing to undergo minimal changes in order to accept non-Finnish speakers, the barriers to internationalization will be reduced by those “insider” foreign members, as it has happened with AYY Kehy.

Finally, as the number of international students has massively increased in the past years and is about to raise even more in the near future, we feel that they should be given the possibility to be represented in the governing of organizations, similar to what has happened in AYY representative council this year.

Thank you for reading until here!

This letter was written in order to make you aware of the situation that foreign degree students face in Aalto University. To conclude this text we would like to thank those organizations of Aalto that have already shown effort in integrating us into their communities. Foreign students are more integrated today in the Finnish university life than they were two years ago. And indeed there are organizations, for example ADS, AMCA, KY Finance, Aaltoes, and AYY Representative council, that provide a great level of service for Aalto students regardless of their mother tongue.

However, the problems described above remain unsolved and we would like to invite all the students and representatives of all the organizations concerned to an open discussion, both through emails and meetings. Our next International Degree Student Committee meeting will be held on March 28th at 16:00 at TF, Otakaari 22. Feel free to join and share with us your opinions and concerns.

Kind regards, with the best of hope, from the students:

Written by: Bernardo Clementino (MSc, Strategy) and Andrei Kalesnik (BSc, Finance)

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