

Nea Hakala 4.9.2023

Dear Chancellor, Rector, Vice Rectors, new students and guests,

What are you going to be when you grow up?

Each of us in this room has certainly had more than one answer to this classic question in our lives. Some of us have a ready answer that may have been clear for a long time. Some may already have a small idea, after all, we have accepted a study place in a certain field. Some only recently and some, like myself, several years ago. Others do not have an answer to the question and answering it can cause stress.

I can admit that answering this question has created stress for myself as well. However, I want to state out loud that there is nothing to worry about. I've had several different answers to the question, such as veterinarian, athlete, teacher, but nowadays I find myself answering mostly that I don't know the final answer yet and it feels surprisingly reassuring.

Questions about the future often raise questions about the significance of things. What interests me, what is important to me? As the world, society and people change, interests and perceptions of significance change. Education has a lot of influence on these themes, and now with the start of university studies or a new academic year, we can once again turn a new page in these reflections.

The university community provides a unique environment to explore and think about the very meaning as well as the world around us. When higher education is discussed in society, the individual is usually far from the discussion. Therefore, I want to encourage all of you to make this period in your life meaningful to you. Feel free to search for your own interests. Think critically and take studies in an interdisciplinary way. Discuss and listen to each other, learning and understanding also grows in the community, not just in lectures.

Personally, I can easily say that my time at university has been the most significant in my life. I have been able to build my own significance by doing studies in different disciplines and by discussing with fellow students after the lectures. In my free time, I have worked in organisations and supervised the interests of students both in my own faculty and in the student union. I have met new people, made friends and followed my own path. This community is an opportunity to find yourself, to grow, to learn and to create your own path.

I am aware that this may be easier said than done, as we students are under tremendous pressure around us. Our graduation times have been tightened, our livelihood is low and consists largely of a loan, and the situation is not getting easier.

Therefore, pressure comes from many directions, which is why I want to talk about empathy once more. People come to university from different life situations, backgrounds, conditions and expectations. All of us - professors, teaching and research staff, as well as other staff and students - are building this university community together. Let's build it by valuing each other, by listening and learning from each other, by giving space to our own and others' ideas, by making it safe for each of its members through our own actions.

When we actively create such a culture and theme in our community, it is also visible in the wider society. This is extremely important at a time when racism in our society is being made visible in public debate. Equality, freedom of the press and reliance on researched information are in question in Finland and in Europe.

As I said earlier, learning, research and science are born in communities. Let's give it some space. Let's be empathetic towards ourselves and others. Let's be open - so we learn more about each other, about society, about science, but also about ourselves.

With these words, I especially want to welcome all of you wonderful new students to the university community. Make this journey meaningful for you.

And yet another good start to the academic year for all of us!