



The Rector's speech

Dear Minister – honoured guests – ladies and gentlemen!

Welcome to Aarhus University's annual anniversary celebration *anno* 2009. On this occasion I wish to emphasize that while Aarhus University has much to celebrate, we're not gathered here today to rest on our laurels. We're not a complacent university, content with cosy local prominence: as stated in the university's strategy, our ambition is to contribute actively to the development of national and global welfare.

Denmark is a nation with a long tradition of trade and shipping. Aarhus University is rooted in that tradition: the role of the provincial homebody doesn't suit us. We prefer to think of ourselves as seasoned seafarers who combine local roots with a cosmopolitan outlook. It's the curious souls who look beyond the familiar and the local who drive cultural development forward. This means examining inherited prejudices and institutions in a critical light. Critical reflection is what propels the development of society – as well as the individual's personal development. This isn't something we spend a lot of energy discussing: as a university, we're more interested in *practicing* it.

Like the seafarer, the university inhabits a space that unites local rootedness and global restlessness. And like the seafarer, the university understands that the essence of the world is change. The world is ambiguous and complex, as Bob Dylan expresses so well in chorus of that famous song 'Blowin' in the Wind': 'the answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind.'

One major function of the university is to discover the answers to the myriad questions humankind poses, through unceasing inquiry and critical analysis. But the university must at the same time bear witness to the fact that no answer is every final; that all conclusions are preliminary. In order to play this crucial role in our society, it is of the utmost importance that the university remain free and independent. Therefore, we must never cease to demand that our Parliament, our government and our civil service continue to live up to our shared goal of ensuring academic freedom.

Aarhus University was founded on freedom and responsibility at its establishment in 1928. Though it became a public educational institution in 1970, the university was built on a will to autonomy. But a university's freedom and independence are never simply granted once and for all; the questioning and critical stance towards received truths as such that defines the university often provokes heated debate – debate that sometimes leads to the imposition of requirements for more political control. The latest example of this is the University Act of 2003, which, in remaking the framework within which Danish universities function, has brought about major changes.



Aarhus University does not question the government's right to set goals for Danish universities' performance and to determine the legislative framework within which the universities are to operate. However, we do question the legitimacy and wisdom of certain specific measures. It comes down to a question of trust. Aarhus University is a successful and well-governed institution, and we believe strongly that we've earned society's trust – also in areas which are overregulated today.

In the spring, the university submitted its responses to the hearings on the government's evaluation of the university sector. An extremely thorough assessment of the psychological work environment at Aarhus University was also carried out.

As a result, the university now possesses two valuable studies that contain concrete recommendations on how we can further our efforts to create one of Europe's best international universities – a university at which researchers are free to explore the unknown, and whose positive and stimulating working environment enables it to attract and retain fantastic faculty and staff.

These two studies also point out the need for improvement in a number of areas, centrally as well as decentrally. But if we are to live up to the demands an advanced knowledge society places on the modern university, we will require freedom and economic resources. Maintaining and developing such a society demands strong universities. For this reason, the future of the university depends on the manner in which the government and Parliament choose to interpret and implement the recommendations that have been made in connection with these studies.

There has been a degree of discordance between declared political intentions regarding university self-governance and the lived reality of the administration of specific areas. Aarhus University has clearly expressed its position regarding the intentions expressed in the 2003 University Act: the government has failed to live up to them fully, not least with regard to freedom and the possibilities for developing research and teaching in accord with the University's own strategy.

That Aarhus University should have responsibility for developing and implementing its own strategy is an issue of paramount importance for us. We'd rather create the university of the future ourselves than wait for someone to come and do it for us. History is rife with examples demonstrating the failure of externally imposed strategies. Here I don't feel it necessary to spotlight the student uprisings of the late '60s, as the events of that time can be interpreted to support any number of mutually contradictory viewpoints. Instead, let me highlight the tension between the political apparatus and the universities by examining a somewhat less recent incident:

Sixty years ago, there was heated political debate about the creation of the General Science Foundation (*Statens Almindelige Videnskabsfond*), the precursor of the Danish Agency for Science, Technology and Innovation and the modern system of research councils. For many academics, the Venstre politician Jensen-Broby, Chairman of the Danish Parliament's Finance Committee, came to



epitomise a short-sighted and utilitarian attitude towards scholarly research. Jensen-Broby had been heard to dismiss the National Museum's collections as 'old junk'. This led to a large demonstration in February 1951, when between six and seven thousand academics and students marched from the University of Copenhagen to the seat of Parliament, headed by the six Vice-Chancellors of the nation's universities and institutions of higher education. Professor of classical philology Franz Blatt, Vice-Chancellor of Aarhus University from 1949 to 1951, participated in the protest. And the protest helped: the General Science Foundation was created by act of Parliament the year after.

A parenthetical remark: The same Jensen-Broby had the following comment to make on the second Galathea scientific marine expedition: 'When money's tight, it's OK to let stuff 400 meters below sea level lie.' Not a man with a deep appreciation for independent, long-range research. Tunnel vision and short-sightedness have been with us since the beginning of time.

To return to the present, where freedom and self-determination are still crucial to a university's ability to fulfil its obligations to society: the freedom of speech of faculty and staff at Aarhus University is not subject to limitation – nor will it be. Better universities can only be created through more open debate: all arguments receive a hearing here – and, more likely than not, a counterargument. Discussions and disagreements based on knowledge and insight can never damage a university.

Freedom can be experienced in various ways. The Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation's representation of Danish universities' degrees of freedom is nonetheless a misleading distortion of the distribution of power between society and university. This representation is misleading because the University Act is a so-called framework or enabling act which grants the Minister broad powers to determine the rules and regulations governing various administrative areas. The actual distribution of power between government and university is, therefore, in practice determined by how the Ministry chooses to exercise the many powers – around fifty, to be precise – granted the Minister by the Act in the form of concrete ministerial orders and other regulative provisions. So while the Act emphasises the centrality of the ideals of academic freedom, Danish universities are in fact subject to extensive micromanagement and detailed regulation which limit the exercise of their freedoms.

Not only does this tendency towards increased bureaucracy and supervision render planning and management difficult; it is also at odds with a long and valuable Danish tradition of decentralisation and mutual trust. Overregulation is particularly pronounced in the area of education: our international colleagues shake their heads in disbelief when they learn of conditions in this country. Consider the accreditation bureaucracy, which prohibits the development of new interdisciplinary study programmes, and which provokes us by requiring us to waste resources on the accreditation of existing study programmes which have long since proved their value for both individuals and society at large. The same problems characterise examination rules as well as the myriad regulations and systems which work to sabotage the internationalisation of the university. All of these forms of overregulation place a serious strain on the necessary cooperation between the state and the



university system. We respectfully petition Parliament, the government and the Ministry to trust us – and to regulate us with a lighter hand.

Aarhus University's response to the hearings emphasises the extent to which the increasing tendency to earmark research funding limits the university's degrees of freedom. The restoration of a reasonable balance between basic research funding and funding subject to competition – for example, in a 60/40 ratio – is of crucial importance. Freedom of research is to a large extent contingent upon the university's continued allocation of sufficient resources to long-term basic research rather than short-term earmarked research and commissioned projects.

We are willing to compete for research funding. Just recently, in fact, the Minister of the Environment has decided to subject part of the university's grant for DMU (The National Environmental Research Institute) to competition. I want to make it perfectly clear that Aarhus University supports the principle of competition, as long as the conditions for the long-term accumulation of knowledge which is the foundation of our society remain intact, and insofar as the principles of fair play and transparency are respected. In other words, the 1970's slogan 'Research for the People' must not be resurrected to promote research on behalf of favoured corporations. That said, it's also worth pointing out that Aarhus University long ago replaced the ivory tower of earlier times with one of Europe's most beautiful and open campuses, governed by the ideal of the exchange of knowledge and bright minds with the whole of society.

Over the years, the university has had the privilege of witnessing numerous examples of seemingly fruitless research that turned out to be brilliant. We have also witnessed faculty members with wild ideas and the courage to believe in them – a gamble which has often paid off. Other researchers have stubbornly held fast in an idea or approach throughout a long career – a determination which has often borne fruit in theories or results that challenge the dominant paradigms of their time.

Our experience teaches us that our responsibility is to create an environment that encourages academic staff to dare to explore uncharted territory – even when success is not guaranteed in advance. Thus, we recognize the importance of supporting and encouraging our 'nerds': it is their unconventional viewpoints and deep immersion in their areas of specialisation that lead to paradigm shifts, innovation and development. To give researchers the freedom they need, however, we require greater financial flexibility – not necessarily greater resources, but greater freedom within the given financial framework. There are too many limits on our freedom today.

Aarhus University is proud of our contribution to strengthening Denmark's position as a small country whose universities number among the very best in the world. We are also proud of the fact that Aarhus University has been named one of the world's best 100 universities – out of over 17,000 universities. At the same time, we humbly acknowledge our debt to those who fought to give Aarhus its university over eight years ago. We have inherited their will to self-determination and freedom.



Rooted in this heritage and tradition, we will continue to contribute to global development and welfare.

This year, Aarhus University has experienced the highest enrolment in our history. As of September 1st, 6,000 bachelor students were registered. This represents an increase of 17% relative to 2007, the previous enrolment record year; relative to 2008, the increase is 22%. In addition, almost 4,500 candidates will begin a graduate degree programme this year. These developments indicate that Aarhus University is the Danish university that is experiencing the strongest growth.

This is something to be proud of. We should also be proud of the fact that we have the lowest dropout rate in the Danish university system: 14.8% after the first year of study. It's not enough to attract bright students; we must also support and retain them. We're doing quite well on both counts.

This is not the only area where we're performing well. We're good at attracting external funding: 1.9 billion Danish kroner in external funding testify to the quality of the research we do here, especially when considered in relation to the university's annual turnover of 5.3 billion kroner. There's a lot going on in the 600,000 cubic meters we occupy. Our faculty and staff – all 8,500 of them – are certainly making the most of their freedom.

I would like to thank the university's faculty and staff for their enormous research efforts as well as the fine results and important publications which are the very foundation of the university's strength. I would also like to thank research councils, public and private foundations, and other partners. Aarhus University numbers among the twenty-five strongest universities in Europe – Cambridge University has the highest ranking. But whereas Cambridge spends about 360,000 kroner annually per student, we at Aarhus must manage on 160,000 kroner per student annually. This indicates that it just may take more than our proverbial Jutlandish industriousness and stubbornness to reach the top, no matter how strongly we believe in ourselves.

To illustrate what conditions are necessary for free, long-term research to flourish, let's take the example of Jens Christian Skou, who received the Nobel Prize in chemistry for research performed in the fifties and sixties that led to the discovery of the sodium-potassium pump. Jens Christian Skou has always emphasized that: 'if my professors had meddled in my work, I would never have won the Nobel Prize.' He made the discoveries that led to the Nobel Prize because he was allowed to pursue the path suggested by his curiosity and his instincts. In a speech here at the university, Skou emphasized that 'there wasn't much funding available for research when I began my work in the fifties. But I had the good fortune to work under a grant system that granted us the freedom we needed to do our work. Seven years passed before I was ready to write my first article.'

Financial and intellectual freedom to get on with the work –that's the central issue. Basic research doesn't lend itself to direction and control; no one can predict where the next breakthrough will occur.



Freedom of research is absolutely fundamental to our work. This is why so many researchers find Section 17(4) of the University Act on individual freedom of research incompatible with the conditions for true freedom of research. According to the Act, members of the academic staff are free to conduct research within the strategic framework laid down by the university for its research activities, to the extent they are not required by management to address specific tasks. In the words of these same academic staff members, everything is fine as long as their managers are sensible – but what happens to the freedom of research if they are not?

Magna Charta, which means 'great charter', is an English legal charter issued in the year 1215 that guaranteed freemen certain rights and liberties. In 1988, the European universities adopted their own Magna Charta in Bologna, on the occasion of the 900th anniversary of the oldest university in Europe. Magna Charta is an expression of the modern European universities' self-understanding as the heirs and custodians of the European humanistic tradition. Naturally, these universities acknowledge that they are subject to development and the course of history, and that national governments have a legitimate claim to review and evaluate how public funds are administered. At the same time, the essential meaning and *raison d'être* of the university as an institution are still the creation of new knowledge and the fostering of graduates who will go on to contribute to all the varied activities of our society.

Here at Aarhus University, we have the human resources necessary to develop an even better university – if our society, trusting us to further its interests and welfare, grants us the freedom necessary to do so.

The Magna Charta of the universities also declares that 'To meet the needs of the world around it, its [the university's] research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political authority and economic power..' And additionally: 'Freedom in research and training is the fundamental principle of university life, and governments and universities, each as far as in them lies, must ensure respect for this fundamental requirement.'

May these words guide us – as we continue to seek the truth – playfully, like dolphins. For as the motto on the seal of Aarhus University reminds us: *Seek firm ground in the depths.*

With such a motto, we are certain that we at Aarhus University will be able to live up to our society's expectations, which are justifiably high in light of current extra investments in the university sector.

Honoured guests, ladies and gentlemen – welcome to Aarhus University's 81st birthday celebration.