

# **Free Education for All(to)**



## **Support for International Students at Aalto University**

**Design for Social Change- Strategy**  
**01/12/20**

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# Executive Summary

## Supporting international students at Aalto

The report summarizes the research and findings from the inquiry into tuition fee paying international students at Aalto, as part of a two week exercise at the end of the Design for Social Change - Strategy course.

The aim of the project was to look into how we, as students in the university, could create a more equitable study experience for our non-EU/EEA international colleagues, who are unjustly financially burdened with large sums of tuition fees.

Looking into Aalto financial documents, manifestos, the history of Finland's introduction to tuition fees, and the global flows of students, we uncover arguments for and against tuition fees. We also unpack the differences between Finland and Aalto's pro-internationalisation vision and the ground reality of an international student coming to Finland.

The key arguments made are that international students are inherently under financial burden due to a myriad of factors such as different currency rates, lower access to funds, and other bureaucratic requirements. With the addition of tuition fees, which double the cost of a student's studies, there is even more of a financial burden, when the resulting tuition fees account for under 3% of Aalto's revenue; a relatively small amount.

We then lay out a plan as an internal student activist group for raising awareness within the school and putting pressure onto Aalto upper management to create more opportunities and funding within the school; and further pressure the government to create policy that further benefits the students. These solutions include:

- 1) Giving Aalto alumni who were unable to make full use of their study right due to financial obligations a platform to access the knowledge.
- 2) Raising awareness through humour with Aalto merchandise that reveals the actualities of student life here.
- 3) Demanding more support for fee-paying students through a petition

Ultimately, we hope the intervention sparks the conversation and gets the ball rolling on creating change for a more equitable study experience for all at Aalto.

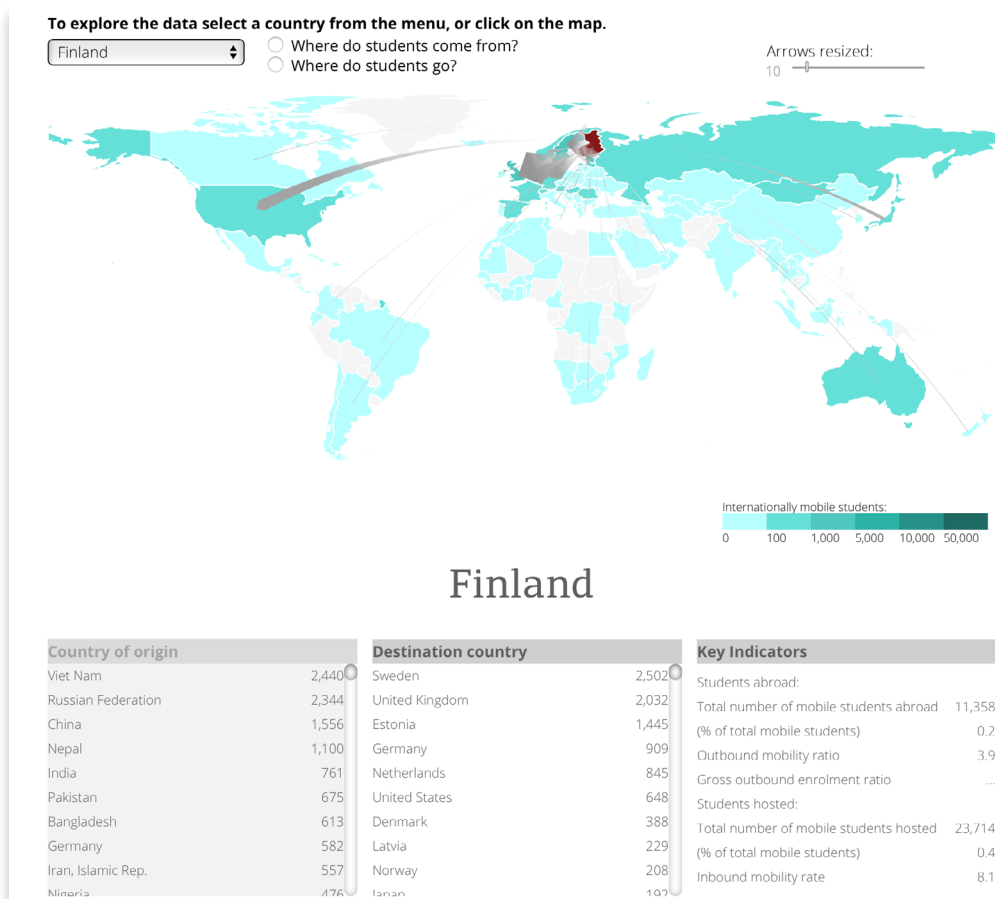
# Introduction

## Internationalisation in Higher Education

The amount of students studying abroad is increasing, and their destinations of choice are becoming more diverse (Migration data portal, 2020). Higher education has long been seen as a tool for social and economic mobility. Since the 1960s, there has been a large flow of global international flows, with a large movement from the Global South towards the Global North (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002, p. 85). Reasons to study abroad include more developed education systems, hopes of settling in more developed nations and economic opportunity. The “international experience” has gained a lot of importance in an increasingly globalised society and economy. In 2017, there were over 5.3 million international students, according to the UIS (Migration data portal, 2020).

Internationalisation is attractive for universities, who use it for generating revenue as international students are charged higher fees, and increasing their rankings, which are partially determined by the university’s international outlook.

Finland is a hosting country, with twice as many students (>23,000) coming in than those who study abroad. ~85% of these students coming in are from non EU/EEA countries, such as Vietnam, Russia, China and India.



Source: <http://uis.unesco.org/en/uis-student-flow>

# International Finland

With an aging population, Finland is looking to draw international talents to advance their knowledge economy (OECD, 2009). Finland's government explicitly expresses the need for internationalisation:

“Deepening our international connections still further is vital for us. We Finns must be prepared to educate and train others from all parts of the globe and to create first-class expertise.” (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017)

One of the strategic goals of the Ministry of Education and Culture being ‘A warm welcome to Finland’ includes “making sure the processes connected with studying and working are more convenient, so that arriving in Finland is easy and inviting” as well as “Encouraging foreign basic degree students in Finland to continue their studies to doctoral level and use their talents in Finnish working life will require active measures” (Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017).

Similarly, the city of Espoo is in the race to gain international talents for their knowledge industry, with 2030 objectives including building a “reputation [that] attracts international talents, visitors, knowledge-intensive companies, investments and events to the city” (“International Espoo,” 2020).

## Introduction of tuition fees in Finland

Following the example of Sweden and Denmark, Finland has introduced regulations that make university tuition fees mandatory for international students who are from countries outside the EU or EEA. Institutions have freedom to name their price for tht tuition fees, though with a minimum of 1500 euro a year (ICEF, 2016).

According to the Ministry of Education and Culture, “the objective is to create more room for selling education abroad and hence improve the resource base for research” (Myklebust & Dobson, 2015). We believe this choice of implementing tuition fees reveals a mindset change from education being a right, to education being a product or something to sell.

# Arguments for and against tuition fees

In a report released by the Nordic Council of Ministers (2013), the arguments both for and against tuition fees in the Higher Education setting are clearly outlined.

## For tuition fees

- 1) *Socio-economic reasonings especially taxation*: The main argument is that international students have not contributed financially to the EU through direct or indirect taxes, and should therefore not be privy to the same benefits as EU/EEA students.
- 2) *Revenue stream for the state and university*; especially since there is no shortage of international applicants: With an increasing number of austerity measures in the EU, there came a need for developing a revenue stream for the state and the university; especially with Finland and the Nordic countries being an increasingly attractive option to study.
- 3) *Attracting the “right” students*: The definition of the “right” student is vague, but it somewhat refers to highly motivated students who wish to take up jobs that benefit the economy, rather than depend on the state.

## Against tuition fees

- 1) *Against the principles of the welfare state*: A major concern is that introducing tuition fees for international students will eventually lead to the introduction of tuition fees for all students; a trend earlier seen in the UK. This goes against the principles of the welfare state, where education is free and easily accessible.
- 2) *Tuition fees dilute the student experience of international students*: Given the large financial burden put on the international students, many are forced to take up part time employment to make ends meet, since they are not eligible for state support. This reduces time they can spend on studies, networking and other such opportunities, and highly diminishes their student experience. This is detrimental to all students in a peer to peer learning environment.
- 3) *Losing talented students to other countries in a globalised higher education world*: Once you add tuition fees and create the transaction of buying and selling education, the mindset of the student also becomes transactional. Given the high living costs, and harsh environment of the Nordic countries, students might be tempted to choose somewhere else.

# International Aalto

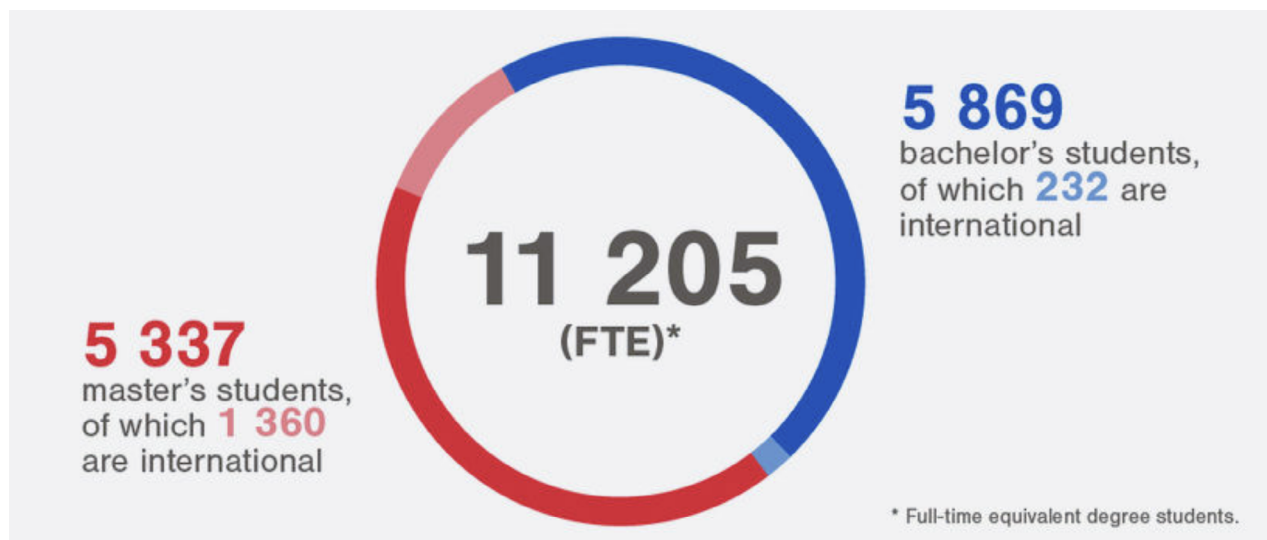
Aalto University, located in Espoo, Finland, was established in 2010 as a merger of three major Finnish universities, combining fields of art, science and business with the intention to foster multi-disciplinary education and research.

In the process of creating the university the university law of Finland was rewritten for the university to be allowed to collect endowment. The university managed to reach its goal of collecting 200 million euros in private donations. The sum was augmented by 2.5 times by the Finnish state (Aalto AlumniNET, 2012).

The university (incorporated as Aalto University Foundation) is governed by the seven-member Aalto University Foundation Board who decides on the Foundation's strategy, operation and financial issues, is responsible for any far-reaching plans and appoints the University president and vice rectors. The university is organized into six schools with their respective deans and administrative structures.

Aalto University is Finland's second largest university by number of students enrolled with over 11,205 full time degree students in 2019 (Aalto University, 2020).

1592 (14%) of these students come from an international background, which includes a mixture of students from the EU/EEA and those who aren't (fee-paying students).



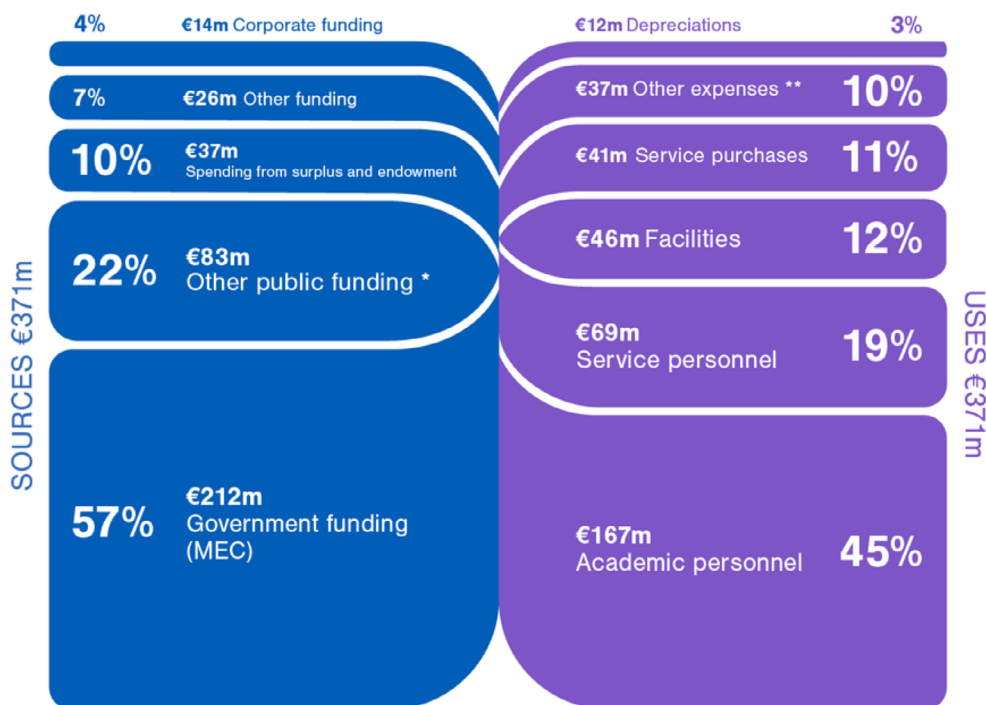
Source: <https://www.aalto.fi/en/aalto-university/key-figures-of-2019-and-reports>



# Aalto Revenue

As of 2017, Aalto charges its non-EU/EEA students 12,000 and 15,000 Euros per year for a three year Bachelors and two year Masters program respectively. The introduction of tuition fees is based on the amendment of the Universities Act that came into effect on 1 January 2016, which states that tuition fees are compulsory for students from countries outside the EU/EEA who participate in education in bachelor's or master's degree programmes taught in a language other than Finnish or Swedish (Aalto University, 2016).

Aalto's Cash Flow statement for 2019 reveals that a majority (83%) of the revenue is from external funding. From the limited accounting expertise of design students, we deduced that less than 3% of Aalto's total revenue comes from the fee paying students at Aalto.



\* Other public funding consists of funding from the Academy of Finland, Business Finland and EU.

\*\* Consists of e.g. travel expenses, materials and supplies.

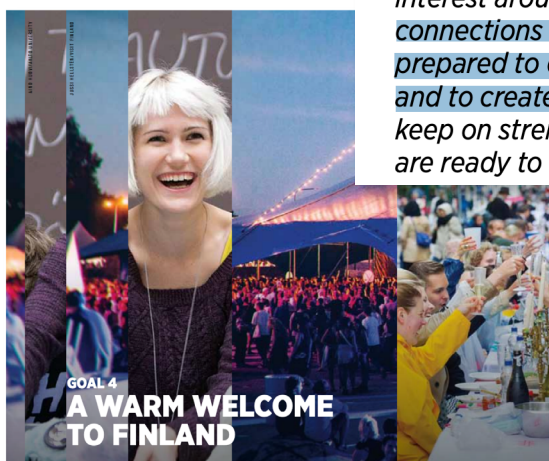
Source: <https://www.aalto.fi/en/aalto-university/key-figures-of-2019-and-reports>

**The argument put forward here is that while the tuition fees of 30,000- 36,000 Euros for a Masters and Bachelors degree respectively put enormous financial burden on students, they represent a minor stream of revenue for the school.**

# Statements and Official Position

Both Finland and Aalto have statements that speak on their desire and commitment to facilitate internationalisation and diversity.

*Culturally, Finland is open and international and attracts interest around the world, but **deepening our international connections still further is vital for us. We Finns must be prepared to educate and train others from all parts of the globe and to create first-class expertise. We must strengthen and keep on strengthening those areas of research that we know are ready to become leading edge fields globally.***



Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Culture - Policies to promote internationalisation in Finnish higher education and research 2017–2025.



## Equality, Inclusion and Diversity at Aalto

At Aalto, we are committed to working for an equal, diverse and inclusive community. Equality, diversity and inclusiveness are in our core values, supporting our community's wellbeing, creativity and performance. In addition to equality and inclusion being aligned with our values, they enable creativity, performance, innovation and attractivity to and retention of diverse talent. This all leading to better research, education and impact – better us.

Source: <https://www.aalto.fi/en/aalto-university/equality-diversity-and-inclusion-at-aalto>



### Our values and way of working

#### Responsibility

Working for a better world, we act sustainably for the wellbeing of all.

#### Courage

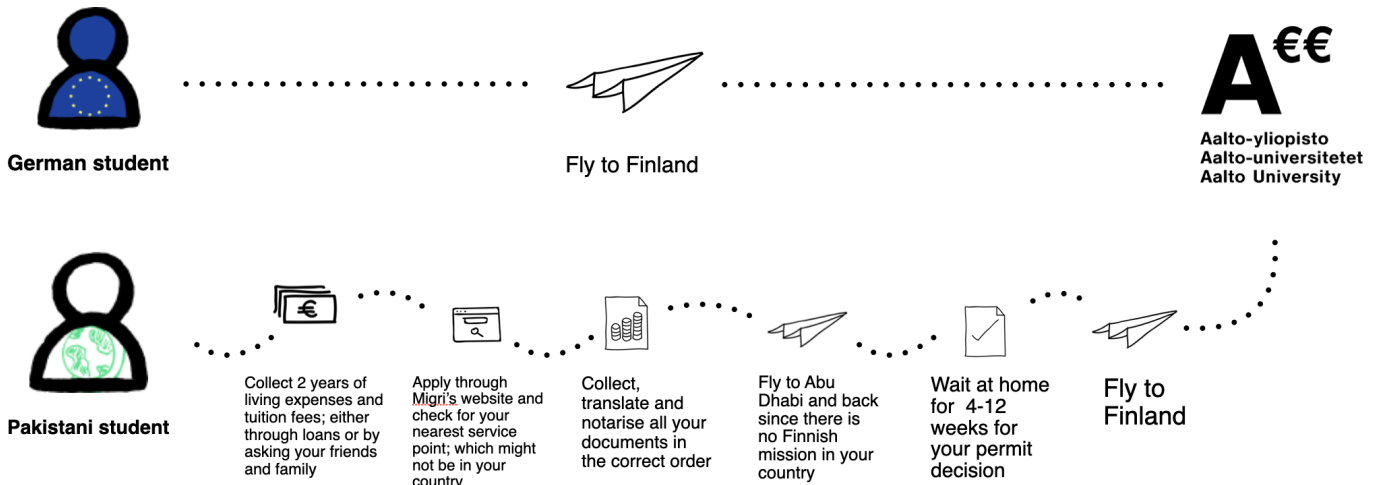
Taking on challenges with agility, creativity and passion, we aim high.

#### Collaboration

Diversity is part of who we are and we foster an empowered community that shines by working together.

# ... and Reality

...but the ground reality is that there are several institutional barriers for international students. To demonstrate the differences between the student experiences of students from an EU/EEA and a non-EU/EEA background, we present a timeline which is based on actual experiences of students.



Even after arriving in Finland and studying at Aalto, the non-EU/EEA students face different challenges throughout their studies.

***“My government doesn’t support me and the loans have a high interest rate!”***

***“I have to work part time to support myself; and finding a job is very hard.”***

***“I saved up so much money, but it’s worth so little here in Finland!”***



***“I have to reapply and pay again for a resident permit”***

While circumstances vary from student to student, the average student from a non European context is already disadvantaged by the passport they hold. The added financial pressure of paying yearly tuition fees vastly diminishes these students’ learning experiences. Making ends meet becomes a priority, rather than doing the learning activities one came for.

**We argue that the university shouldn’t further add to these struggles with an increased financial burden.**

**In the words of Aalto's  
marketing team...**

**Its time to  
Change the Game.**

# Aim of the Project

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One of our key aims with this project is to get an understanding of what Aalto and public officials see international students as. Are international students educational customers, where their tuition fees are part of the transaction for a degree? Are they merely a checkbox for increasing university rankings through internationality?

International students can also be seen as financial actors. Students that are not financially burdened and that are able to extend their right to study and stay like other EU citizens, also tend to stay within the country for longer periods, contributing to the local economy through both work and taxes.

International students also bring a wealth of knowledge and culture, making them important socio-cultural additions to the increasingly diverse society, as knowledge and ideas become increasingly globalized.

## Our position

Our belief is that it is important that the values of equality and commitment to diversity should be upheld and encouraged; rather than just hollow words.

While there is a general understanding that students from outside the EU do pay tuition fees, our project looks at raising even more awareness amongst the student body about the financial burden placed on international students. We aim to get people talking about the injustice, rather than just let things be.

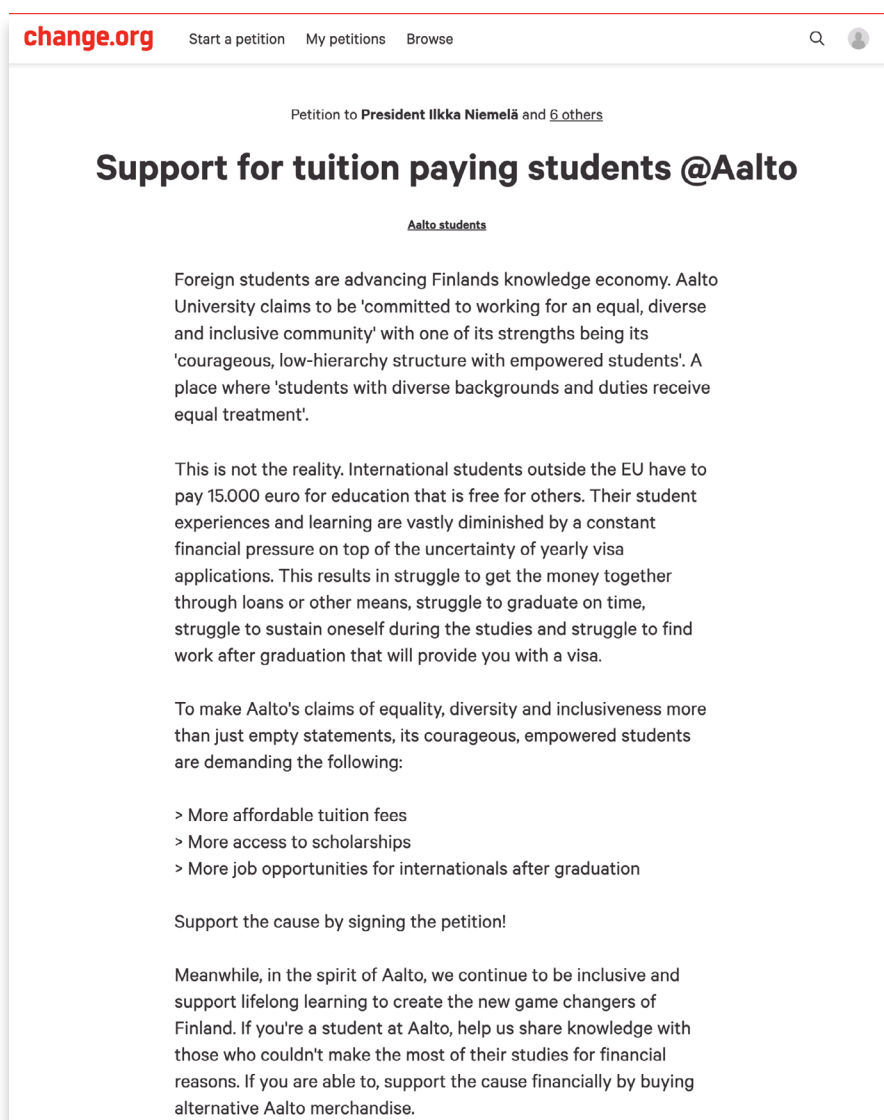
Our intervention hopes to agitate the upper management of Aalto into taking action, both internally within the school and externally, by pressurising and working with the Finnish education Ministry. The media is a key part of our intervention, as it draws light to the inadequacies of the welfare state.

We also hope that our efforts lead to larger change in the route to facilitate internationalisation of Finland; changes in other systems such as immigration and social support are also vital in integrating young, foreign talent who are allowed the space and opportunity to grow and meaningfully contribute to the country.

# Petition

The keystone of our intervention is a simple petition, addressed to the president and deans of the university. The aim of the petition is to ask for more affordable tuition fees, increased access to scholarships and the university to facilitate a greater connection with the industry.

There is a general trend of a quick response by the upper management of the school to react and take action when something is presented and shared by the media. To that end, this petition looks to make public the demands of the students.



The image shows a screenshot of a Change.org petition page. At the top, the Change.org logo is on the left, and navigation links for 'Start a petition', 'My petitions', and 'Browse' are in the center. On the right, there are search and user profile icons. The main heading of the petition is 'Support for tuition paying students @Aalto', with a sub-heading 'Petition to President Ilkka Niemelä and 6 others'. Below the heading, the petition is attributed to 'Aalto students'. The text of the petition describes the challenges faced by international students at Aalto University, such as high tuition fees and financial pressure, and lists three demands: more affordable tuition fees, more access to scholarships, and more job opportunities for internationals after graduation. It concludes with a call to action to sign the petition and a note about supporting the cause through alternative means like buying merchandise.

change.org Start a petition My petitions Browse

Petition to **President Ilkka Niemelä** and **6 others**

## Support for tuition paying students @Aalto

**Aalto students**

Foreign students are advancing Finland's knowledge economy. Aalto University claims to be 'committed to working for an equal, diverse and inclusive community' with one of its strengths being its 'courageous, low-hierarchy structure with empowered students'. A place where 'students with diverse backgrounds and duties receive equal treatment'.

This is not the reality. International students outside the EU have to pay 15,000 euro for education that is free for others. Their student experiences and learning are vastly diminished by a constant financial pressure on top of the uncertainty of yearly visa applications. This results in struggle to get the money together through loans or other means, struggle to graduate on time, struggle to sustain oneself during the studies and struggle to find work after graduation that will provide you with a visa.

To make Aalto's claims of equality, diversity and inclusiveness more than just empty statements, its courageous, empowered students are demanding the following:

- > More affordable tuition fees
- > More access to scholarships
- > More job opportunities for internationals after graduation

Support the cause by signing the petition!

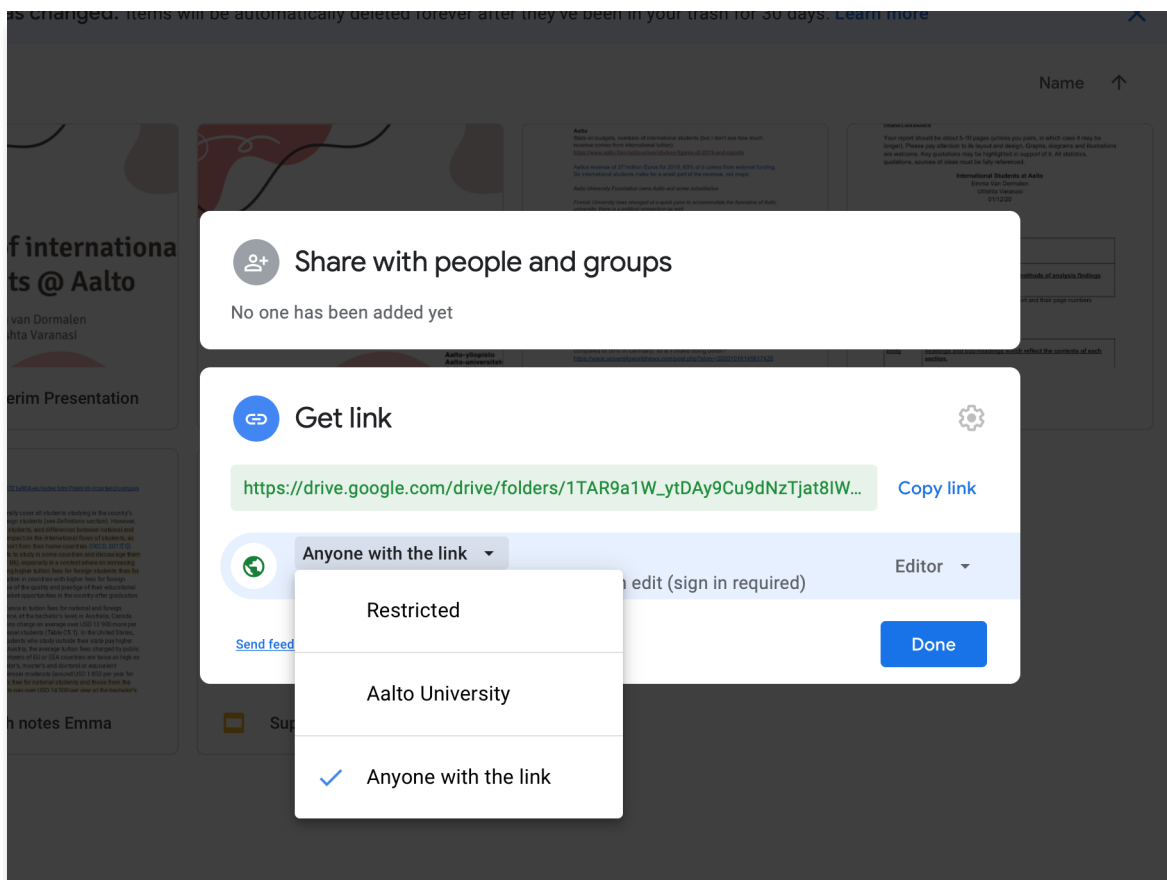
Meanwhile, in the spirit of Aalto, we continue to be inclusive and support lifelong learning to create the new game changers of Finland. If you're a student at Aalto, help us share knowledge with those who couldn't make the most of their studies for financial reasons. If you are able to, support the cause financially by buying alternative Aalto merchandise.

# Knowledge Sharing

Something that is very important to Aalto and the Finnish educational systems is lifelong learning (Hautamäki, 2019). However, most international students aren't able to make use of their study rights (4 years for a Masters student), as the financial obligation means they must finish their studies within 2 years. This means a limited timeline in which compromises to their education must be made and they are unable to take the classes they wish to do so.

Our intervention suggests that current students at Aalto record and share classes and resources with students who weren't able to make the most of the study experience because of their financial commitments. All this would be made available through a cloud based server; storage would not be an issue since educational accounts on Google Drive have an unlimited storage.

There will also be attention drawn to the petition within the drive.



# Alternative Aalto Shop

The Alternative shop is a satirical take on the marketability of Aalto, drawing attention to slogans and merch that reveal a lot more about the actual ground reality many students live in. It uses humour to spread the message, and draw more people towards the petition and the cause. Each product further links to the petition, and helps spread awareness of the campaign within the Aalto community.

All profits go towards financing the petition and its campaign.

Home / T-shirt, Paid for Aalto University, denim blue



### T-shirt, Paid for Aalto University, denim blue


23038500  
Unisex T-shirt with a Paid for Aalto University print. Manufactured in countries with easily exploitable labour conditions  
**Material:** 100 % organic cotton

Select product  
T-shirt, Paid for Aalto University, denim blue XS

Quantity  
1 pcs ~~€15,000.00~~ €21.00

ADD TO CART

Home / Fee Transfer done Tote Bag



### Fee Transfer done Tote Bag

23034900  
A black tote bag that can replace your passport as proof your non-EU/ EEA status. Just like you, this bag was made elsewhere.  
**Size:** 36 x 41 cm  
**Material:** 100 % recycled cotton  
€10.00 / pcs

Quantity  
1 pcs Total: €10.00  
€10.00/pcs

ADD TO CART





# Implementation

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The authors of this report are working as an informal group, but more importantly, as members of the school community. Initially, the petition, knowledge sharing platform and Alternative Aalto Shop will be set up by us. All of this can be set up online at virtually no cost (in case the Alternative Aalto merch is produced on order). Once the structures are there however, it is essential that other members of the Aalto community contribute to the cause by signing the petition, sharing resources, purchasing Alternative Aalto merch and overall sharing the activities within their own networks.

As we are not providing people with any other incentive than a cause to commit to, humor and a channel to which to direct their frustration, it is important that we make participation simple.

The drive folder would include templates on how to ask teachers to record classes as well as methods to do it yourself in the scenario that the teachers don't agree. It would be 'read only' for public visitors. If members of the community want to contribute by uploading resources they can reach out to get editing access. These students would be the most active supporters of the cause and might be willing to collaborate with us to form the core team. Finding these students can be a risk and likely requires recruitment efforts made.

The petition and Alternative Aalto Shop require less active participation. The petition requires a digital signature, and represents the number of people who believe international students do not deserve to bear the disproportionate financial burden. The Alternative Aalto Shop is not expected to make many sales, but rather to serve as a publicity stunt, with its provocative messages serving as conversation starters.

To create momentum we hope to collaborate with the more official student organisations. Aalto has many student associations of which some are regularly in discussion with the school management. Because of their official status they are more dependent on the school and have to play nice. Since we are planning to be a loosely organised, non-official group, we have more room to be critical.

We will ask the student associations to share our petition among their members and management they interact with if they can, possibly only in the less official channels like telegram chats or word of mouth. They can also take up the matter with staff in any collaborations they have, but without having to take responsibility for the matter as an organisation.

# Impact

Our main aim is to bring attention to the inequalities between students and spark conversation. These conversations have an impact on the culture of the Aalto community, and hopefully result in changes in regulations on a school level, or even a societal level.

## **Community impact**

Within the Aalto community, most of the advocacy is done through official associations or student positions in work groups. It is great that students are included in discussions, but these discussions are held on Aalto's terms. With our movement being more critical and disruptive, students at Aalto might be inspired to be more demanding and explore other ways of exercising their influence on the community.

Measuring this impact would mainly be about checking if we really managed to stir the pot and get people engaged. How many signatures did we collect? How many items were sold in the Alternative Aalto Shop? Is the knowledge-sharing picked up by students and able to run without too much of our interference? Did we get any media attention? Did we get any response from the school management? Overall, are people talking?

## **Impact on Aalto regulations**

We expect Aalto to be more self-critical and communicative about matters that influence students' wellbeing. We are urging them to take action through the petition. However, we are not very specific on what that action needs to be.

Impact on Aalto regulations could include various things: freezing the price of tuition fees for a set amount of years, more transparency of the scholarship process, introduction of needs-based scholarships, increased support in finding work etc.

## **Societal / political impact**

If our movement will be shared in national news channels, the conversation will break out of the bubble that is Otaniemi. The extent and impact of this conversation is very hard to measure. Students of other universities might be inspired to set up similar initiatives and overall there might be more questioning of the direction higher education is going.

# Conclusion

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The project has been designed from a student perspective, with an empathetic approach to the struggles of a fee paying international student at Aalto. The beliefs of the group are the same as Aalto and the Finnish Government; equal accessibility to education for all. The aim of the project is to make this reality.

Given the time frame of developing the project, there are certain limitations to the process:

- 1) While an attempt was made to reach out to management at Aalto to understand the decision making behind the tuition fees, there is still a lot that is unclear to us about the internal workings of Aalto. This makes it harder to specify who to include or address when making a change.
- 2) The project is focused on creating a buzz and then leaving the change up to the old structures of decision making. Future work should include a strategy that describes how to move from creating awareness to taking action.
- 3) There's a lack of a long term road map for the project, with a gap in financing the project, other than a few sales for the merchandise. It leads to the question of how long can this project last?

There are also limitations within the short timeframe in understanding some of the older notions that warrant questioning and inspection within the educational system. One such system would be meritocracy as a basis for scholarships. It can be questioned; when there is a huge diversity in the background of applicants, it can be argued that awarding scholarships on "merit" further reinforces the divide caused by financial, social and geographical privilege; factors that create "merit" for students. The study of an educational system should include a holistic approach to the students, and their backgrounds; rather than the overarching label of "international student".

There is immense potential for the government and Aalto to invest in international students as long term projects, rather than short term sources of cash. While higher education all around the world is becoming increasingly commercialized, it leads to an opportunity for Finland to be a frontrunner in the field of equitable education for all; with Aalto as the breeding ground for this change.

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