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TALKING RIGHTS
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Forty Years of Human Rights at Åbo Akademi University: From Foundations to Future

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By **Isabell Junkkari**

Since its founding in 1985, the Institute for Human Rights at Åbo Akademi (Institutet för mänskliga rättigheter, IMR) has played a pivotal role in shaping Finland's academic, legal, and policy frameworks surrounding human rights. As the Institute approaches its 40th anniversary, we reflect on its pioneering legacy, impact on the Nordic human rights landscape, and its ongoing commitment to research, education, and public dialogue.

The Institute was formally established on 1 January 1985, following a decision by the university's chancellor on 13 November 1984 to approve the Institute's *reglemente*—its guiding principles.¹ At that time, Finland's approach to human rights was still in its infancy, with limited legal infrastructure or judicial review. The creation of the Institute marked a wider shift that brought focused attention and scholarship to human rights in the region.

Under the visionary leadership of Professor Allan Rosas, a pioneering figure in Finnish human rights scholarship, the Institute rapidly transformed from an ambitious idea into a vital academic and policy-shaping body. During his tenure from 1985 to 1995, Rosas led transformative research initiatives, fostered international collaborations, and positioned Finland as a prominent voice in Nordic human rights discourse. One of the Institute's early achievements was co-hosting the Nordic Human Rights Meetings—gatherings that brought together government officials, scholars, and civil society to explore how international human rights norms could be implemented within domestic policies.² These discussions laid the groundwork for embedding global human rights standards into Finland's legal and political structures and set the stage for the country's sustained commitment to upholding international human rights principles.

The Institute's early momentum was propelled by the commitment of a small yet determined team, including at first Anne-Christine Eriksson³ and then Catarina Krause and Harriet Nyback-Alanen.⁴ Their dedication was supplemented by the contributions of alternative civilian service members (conscientious objectors) who supported various administrative and operational tasks.⁵ This collective effort played a crucial role in setting the foundation for IMR's growing influence on Finland's human rights agenda.

The transition period between Professors Rosas and Scheinin saw interim directors Markku Suksi (1995-1997), Sia Spiliopoulou Åkermark (autumn 1997), and Kristian Myntti (spring 1998), contribute to the Institute's continued

evolution, enhancing its research profile and further strengthening its connections with the legal community and policymakers.

As director from 1998 to 2008, Professor Martin Scheinin steered the Institute for Human Rights at Åbo Akademi University into an era marked by academic and pedagogical expansion. His leadership was characterised by bolstering Finland's dedication to international human rights, reinforcing their constitutional safeguards, and positioning the Institute as a leading research institution in the field. A notable achievement of his tenure was the establishment of the Nordic Network for Human Rights Research in 2002,⁶ a collaborative endeavour with Finnish human rights institutes and Nordic partner universities. Scheinin's dedication to academic innovation also shaped the Institute's doctoral programme⁷ and culminated in the launch of the Master's Degree Programme in International Human Rights Law in 2006, the first of its kind in Finland.⁸

During this period, the Institute produced textbooks and scholarly publications that became staples in both Finnish legal education and LLM programmes worldwide.⁹ These resources not only cultivated a new generation of human rights scholars and practitioners but also reinforced the IMR's status as a centre of educational excellence.

Continuing the Institute's legacy of impactful human rights research and education, the Institute has thrived under the guidance of Professor Elina Pirjatanniemi since 2008. Under her directorship, the IMR has further cemented its worldwide network, e.g. through active involvement in the Global Campus on Human Rights, a global network of over 100 universities for education in human rights and democracy, and the Shurea project with partner universities on the African continent. Fruitful collaborations with other Nordic human rights institutes and universities further highlight the Institute's commitment to fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and human rights research across borders.

The master's programme initiated under Scheinin evolved in 2018 into the Master's Programme in International Law and Human Rights, drawing students from across the world. This year, after decades of behind-the-scenes advocacy, Åbo Akademi achieved a major milestone: the right to confer law degrees, including the esteemed Doctor of Laws. These degrees, now part of the newly established Åbo Akademi School of Law, serve as a powerful

testament to the IMR's enduring influence and its commitment to advancing legal and human rights scholarship.

The journey of the Institute for Human Rights at Åbo Akademi University underscores the capacity of academic institutions to shape both national and international human rights discourse and frameworks. Its contributions to research, policy, and education have been instrumental in integrating human rights into Finland's legal and political systems.

As the Institute commemorates its 40th anniversary, it looks not just to honour its past but to shape a forward-thinking future. The launch of its new blog, *Talking Rights*, exemplifies this vision by creating a platform for academics, students, practitioners, alumni, and the public to engage in vibrant discussions on issues related to human rights. With this initiative, the IMR seeks to make human rights an accessible and relevant topic, rigorously examined and debated by a wider audience.

Looking ahead, the Institute's steadfast dedication to justice and equality promises to continue driving progress in an increasingly unstable world.

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1. Annual Report of the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights 1985, p. 15. ↩
 2. Annual Report of the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights 1990, p. 16-17. ↩
 3. Annual Report of the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights 1986, p. 22. ↩
 4. Annual Report of the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights 1987, p. 19. ↩
 5. *ibid.* ↩
 6. Annual Report of the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights 2002, p. 12. ↩
 7. Annual Report of the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights 2004, p. 12. ↩
 8. Annual Report of the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights 2006-2007, p. 14. ↩
 9. Annual Report of the Åbo Akademi Institute for Human Rights 2004, p. 14. ↩

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