



150 years young

If you're like me, then part of the joy of a birthday is the opportunity to think about what you have done and to plan a little ahead. But what if it's your 150th birthday?



Leonids Ribickis

I am truly honoured to be the Rector of the Riga Technical University (RTU) as it celebrates the first century-and-a-half of its existence. I deliberately use the word 'birthday' rather than 'anniversary' because to me, at least, the university has a personality; one that is difficult to sum up in a simple sentence, but that is there nevertheless, regardless of whether you are in the institution's Old Town buildings or in its modern campus at Ķīpsala.

So, what makes up this personality? Well, in part, the university's personality is formed by its past students, academic staff and researchers. Notable among the RTU's past professors is Nobel Prize winner Wilhelm Ostwald, one of the modern founders of physical chemistry. He won the prestigious award in 1909 for his pioneering work on catalysis, a chemical reaction brought on by a substance that is appropriately called a catalyst.

Ostwald's research at the Riga Technical University goes back to 1881. While that was indeed a long time ago, it is nevertheless interesting to muse about how his work still affects us now, especially if you are sitting comfortably on an *airBaltic* plane! Petroleum refining, for instance, makes extensive use of catalysts. Without the fundamental



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understanding of catalysis that Ostwald provided, the oil industry would not be able to develop the refined fuel that aviation requires; not to mention gasoline, diesel and other important sources of transport energy.

If we think about traditions and continuity in science at the RTU, I should also mention Friedrich Zander, who set the path for Russian space flights and carried out trajectory calculations for flights to Mars; and Michael von Doliwo-Dobrowolsky, who developed industrial applications for alternating current, such the three-phase transformer and the three-phase electrical motor. Part of the personality of the Riga Technical University lies in the resoluteness and dedication of people like Ostwald and his contemporaries. The university has persevered with the commitment that science requires and has the results to prove it. However, while very respectable, our accomplishments still don't describe us fully.

Along with dedication and discipline, scientists also need to have imagination. This enables them to ask why things are the way that they are and involves asking 'what-if' questions.

The Riga Technical University encourages the imagination and enquiring spirit of its students and staff. Today, important research topics start with questions like 'what if'. For example, what if our water supply system becomes contaminated? Questions like these have prompted large-scale research programmes with practical outcomes.

It might seem strange that I, as a scientist, ascribe great importance to such seemingly non-scientific factors as 'personality'. That is because, having been part of the university's academic life for almost 40 years, I cannot help feeling that there is much more to the Riga Technical University than merely its buildings, constitution and historical legacy.

The university's students, both past and present, have also shaped its personality. Today, the Riga Technical University is acquiring an increasingly international atmosphere, as students from all around the world are drawn to study here.

Our personality reflects the enthusiasm and vibrancy of many young, ambitious and talented minds. Therefore, you can be sure that when it comes to having a birthday celebration, the Riga Technical University will certainly know how to throw a party this autumn.

Leonids Ribickis
Rector,
Riga Technical University

