

Dear graduates,  
ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the University of Potsdam's 2026 graduation ceremony, and congratulations, dear graduates, on reaching this important milestone in your lives!

A great deal has happened during the years you have spent studying at our university. Armed conflicts around the world have become more numerous—not only in Ukraine and the Middle East. Even though we do not live in a war zone, these global conflicts and competing perspectives have inevitably found their way into our academic discussions. At the same time, artificial intelligence has arrived with tremendous force after decades of research, including many paths that ultimately proved unsuccessful. Now, after seventy years of AI research, the moment has finally arrived. Many aspects of everyday life are already supported by AI, especially text-generating systems, and the widespread adoption of self-driving vehicles and real-time language translation is just around the corner.

Naturally, these developments are having a profound impact on our university's fundamental missions: teaching, research, and public engagement. We are already using AI to advance our teaching methods and to better address the individual needs of an increasingly diverse student body. We are also helping our students learn how to use these tools effectively and responsibly. During your years at the University of Potsdam, dear graduates, these changes were only beginning to emerge. But does that make your degree less valuable? Of course not.

As I hope you have discovered during your time here, a university education is about far more than acquiring knowledge and technical skills. Higher education is about personal growth through learning together. It is about engaging with fellow students from Germany and around the world, in German and in many other languages. It is about placing knowledge in context and understanding its broader significance. And it is about developing the capacity for critical thinking—a skill that grows through open debate and through engaging seriously with ideas that may fundamentally challenge your own convictions. A university education invites you to step outside your bubble and into the complex world of hypotheses, assumptions, and, of course, established knowledge that defines scholarly inquiry. To achieve these truly important educational goals, a vibrant and inspiring campus community is essential. That is also the vision behind our new fourth campus at Brauhausberg. Thanks to the extraordinary generosity of Hasso Plattner and his foundation, a new living and learning environment is being created there—one where people will want to spend time teaching and learning together.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that universities around the world are increasingly under scrutiny. Why is that? Some critics argue that our teaching is too theoretical and not sufficiently focused on career preparation. Others accuse universities of ideological bias. Interestingly, that criticism comes from nearly every point on the political spectrum, which may not be an entirely bad sign. Others claim that universities underestimate artificial intelligence and are integrating it too slowly into teaching and research, a topic I have already addressed. Then there is the charge—one that predates the current U.S. administration—of “too much DEI”: too much emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion. And finally, concerns are repeatedly raised about academic freedom and freedom of expression on campus. Why, some ask, should everyone be allowed to say whatever they want?

Now, I do not want to dismiss all of these criticisms out of hand. Universities should be open to criticism, and public institutions of higher education must continually evolve. Only by doing so can we respond to changes in society and ensure that the public resources entrusted to us are used as effectively as possible for the benefit of society as a whole. Yet these debates often reveal a

surprisingly limited understanding of what universities actually achieve today in terms of research, teaching, and public engagement. Memories of one's own student days forty or more years ago are only of limited help in understanding the modern university.

And here we must also look critically at ourselves. Have we done enough to explain our work to the wider public—not just to those who already support us or work closely with us? Have we clearly communicated to ordinary citizens why universities are more than schools for adults? Have we explained why cutting-edge research takes place at universities and why universities remain the most effective environment for generating start-up companies, often deep-tech ventures built on sophisticated technologies that are difficult to replicate?

I do not believe we have done enough. For Harvard, that failure nearly proved disastrous. Very few people in Tennessee, Alabama, or Maine truly understand what happens at Harvard or how the university contributes to the public good. European universities should not allow the same thing to happen to us. That is why public engagement and communication are so important. That is why events such as the annual Potsdam Science Day matter. That is why we invest a significant portion of our budgets in activities that connect the university with society. At the University of Potsdam, we understand public engagement in a particularly broad sense. It includes start-up creation and technology transfer, policy advising, continuing education, citizen science, cultural outreach, and public dialogue.

This broad understanding of public engagement enables universities to contribute even more effectively to the common good and to help secure health, prosperity, peace, and quality of life for future generations. And the most important way in which the knowledge and capabilities developed at this university reach the wider world is through you, our graduates. There is no more powerful way to share it. You are now carrying into the world the knowledge you have gained here, the broad and mature perspective you have developed, and the confidence needed to succeed in today's complex world and to make your own contribution to society.

I have no doubt that you will do exactly that, dear graduates, leveraging the knowledge, skills, and perspective you have gained at the University of Potsdam. You can be proud to have earned your bachelor's degree, your master's degree, or your doctorate at our university. I congratulate you wholeheartedly on this achievement. A world of opportunities now awaits you. I wish you all the best for the journey ahead, along with good health, success, and happiness with your families and loved ones!