

Graduation Ceremony 2023 June 29th, 2023 | Key Note Speech

Dear President Günther,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Allow me to express my heartfelt gratitude for the invitation to speak at this graduation ceremony. I am very happy to be here today, with those of you celebrating their bachelor's and master's degrees or doctorates in such a beautiful setting.

There was nothing at all celebratory about the moment I received my doctoral certificate at the University of Mainz in 1994. I crept into the Dean's Office on a gloomy autumn day in the unadorned Philosophicum - a plain building from the 1970s - and the faculty's managing director, wearing a bored expression, pressed a cardboard roll into my hand. So, I thought, that was it. Graduation ceremonies were not common in those days. But this old tradition was rediscovered in the early 2000s, even here in Potsdam. And that's a good thing.

Today marks both an end and a beginning of your life's journey. A moment to pause, to look back on what you have achieved over the years. To let the images and events pass through your mind's eye, your first days here at the university, the first exams, the Corona period, successes and setbacks, hope, and sometimes perhaps also moments of despondency. Your time at university was spent in a protected space. Universities offer the freedom of trial and error, of development, of reflection. Most of you will probably never again have so much time to delve into a topic and get to the bottom of things, to illuminate it from so many sides, as during your time here at the University of Potsdam. To ask so many critical questions and - hopefully - to throw old convictions overboard, to come to the realization that there are hardly any truths, but there are many different points of view. For me, that is the very signature of the university, to question supposed certainties and to foster an open way of thinking.

Over the past few years, you have become acquainted with the university, which has its very own rules, its very own signature. In your professional life, you will have to adapt to a different frame of reference and face new challenges. For this, I wish you all the very best and all the happiness in the world.

The way careers work in Germany, the coming months are likely to be some of the most important **in your lives. You are facing an important decision about which path you want to take in you professional life.**

In Germany, personal histories are thought of more as a straight-line path than in the USA, for example. At least in this respect, I like the American model better than the German version. We often have too little heterogeneity in professional life. Changing careers still often carries the stigma of failure.

This is particularly true for the field that I am looking at, namely politics. The Bundestag is mainly comprised of lawyers, doctors, tax consultants, and political scientists. There are certainly too few members of parliament who do not hold a university degree, although today you are probably the wrong audience with whom to talk about this point, but there are also too few people from industry and not enough computer scientists or engineers.

But we also see little movement from politics to think tanks or academics and back again. This is also a difference from the USA. In part, this leads to very practical problems in scholarship.

For example, why governments and parliaments act the way they do, especially in crises, is often something we can only describe in very theoretical terms because we mostly lack *inside knowledge* of the government system. It is still very unusual to find a former top civil servant in a professorship in Germany.

Although the university anticipates some social trends, in other respects it is a place of dogged persistence. For example, we continue to put **many unnecessary obstacles in the way of young academics - even the few who choose this path**. Yet university scholarship is actually the most beautiful profession in the world. But the state and federal science ministries have so far been unable to design a realistic, viable career path, even for potential Leibniz Prize winners. And instead of improving the situation, the recently presented draft for the German Act on Temporary Scientific Contracts (*Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz*), as well as its revision, showed a rather breathtaking lack of realism. The result is not very edifying. The opportunities I once had of having long-term contracts after completing my post-doctoral qualification (*Habilitation*) are generally not available to you - if you aspire to go into scholarship. It is particularly painful to have to say this at this point.

Of course, systems and cultures can change on both a small and a large scale, and it is also up to you to demand new, bolder solutions or - depending on your career choice - to design them yourself.

Different career paths - and cultures - are just one example of the **fact that we are all required to further develop the state, the economy and society so that they can withstand the demands of our time**. Of course, it is always easy to call for such things in speeches like this. But we must focus on changing structures and cultures, about making them more future-proof. And of course that also applies to ourselves and to the university. We all talk about internationalization, but we make life infinitely more difficult for ourselves. From my own experience, I can say that it is not a pleasure to set up an English-language dual degree program. It is only possible if you have a lot of intrinsic motivation. The management of this university once helped me with a lot of pragmatism. And although it seemed, under the current legal situation, nearly impossible to study in both Potsdam and Dublin, we managed it together and I am very pleased that some graduates of our master's program are here today. On the one hand, this example shows the rigidity of our rules, but on the other hand it also shows that it is possible in Germany to interpret rules creatively and to find a way.

And yet, compared to many other institutions, the university is still a place of joy. I have been researching the Bundeswehr for several years and sometimes get the impression that even the brightest minds in our country, if they had been given the task of designing a dysfunctional organization, would not have come up with such an over-bureaucratized and inefficient structure. It will be interesting to see whether the turnaround proclaimed by Chancellor Olaf Scholz will change this and set an example for the state's ability to reform. For the turnaround is not just about the Bundeswehr, of course. It's about the larger question of whether the government and parliament - and behind them, ultimately, we, society - are capable of adapting to the challenges of our time. The Bundeswehr is just one example. One could name many other areas in government, society and the economy where adjustments are urgently needed. Just think of the German railway system, Deutsche Bahn, or public and private construction, to name just a few buzzwords. Or if we look at the European level: are we in a position to reform the EU in such a way that a powerful European response can be found to the major issues of our time, which include climate change, crises and conflicts from Ukraine to Africa, the Mediterranean region, the Middle East, and the South China Sea?

As much as Europeans were willing in the past to create a common economic and monetary area without internal borders, as much as they relied on the rule of law and close cultural exchange, there was little progress toward a broadly defined security policy. No significant integration took place in this core area of state sovereignty. In practice, this then led us to outsource Europe's security to the United States, which was convenient in many respects but turned out to be a high-risk gamble, and not only because of Donald Trump. That Europe should become more sovereign is widely agreed. Opinions differ widely, however, on how to achieve this. Little has happened so far, despite the wars and conflicts.

Maybe that's because we Europeans are the way we are. However, all the rules we once gave ourselves are man-made. I am convinced that people can change them. It is obvious that this will not be easy. First and foremost, people will argue about the right conclusions to draw from the evidence, and that's a good thing. That's the essence of democracy, and no one should get the idea that he alone has the patent solution that everyone else has to follow. However, it is crucial that action is taken after debate. Discourse alone does not bring solutions.

The future remains unwritten; it is up to all of us to shape it. And you are setting out into this future today. Go out into that world, knowing that you can shape that world. And one day, one of you will return here and give the graduation speech. I'm convinced that she or he will then be able to say that we succeeded in finding answers to the pressing questions of the day, that we were capable of reform, and that in the process you, your generation, made a central contribution so that we could live in peace and freedom and hopefully in harmony with our environment. And I am convinced that what you learned here will show you the way.

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