

Prof. Oliver Günther, Ph.D. / President's Speech, 2025 Graduation Ceremony

Dear graduates,
ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the University of Potsdam's graduation ceremony 2025 and congratulations, dear graduates, on this important milestone in your lives. Over the past year, you have worked towards your degree with determination, in a year that – incidentally – the German academic landscape dedicated to the topic of "freedom".

This primarily referred to freedom of teaching and research, but we now know that we also have to worry about freedom of speech. Hardly anyone who launched the academic year back then would have dreamed of what has happened since. Political and military controversies are rocking our global community, in Russia and Ukraine, in Israel and Palestine, in Iran, and of course also in the US, not just at Harvard.

As a result, universities around the world are facing a profound crisis. When US President Trump lashes out at the top universities in his own country, it is not just the act of one individual. A deeply emotionalized and widespread scientific skepticism is behind it, as we have already experienced to some degree – but not to this radical extent – during the climate and COVID-19 crises. I could say that we know this from Germany; it was less than 100 years ago. But such analogies fall short, and we know where it led back then.

The fact that we as universities are currently under such fire is perhaps also due to the fact that we have occasionally placed too much emphasis on topics that many people outside the academic world cannot relate to. In recent years, universities have not succeeded sufficiently in communicating to the public that we make very significant – I would even say essential – contributions to the common good: as places of cutting-edge research, science-based teaching, and highly dynamic transfer. This message has not been received by large parts of the public. Instead, many citizens think that universities are too self-absorbed and only conduct research into diversity, inclusion, gendering, and wokeness – a new form of the ivory tower. This is a blatant distortion, of course, but one that we urgently need to correct. Because it leads to drastic reactions, as we are now seeing in the US, for example.

I've just written a book called "The Diverse University". When I finished my manuscript at the end of last year, I could never have imagined that the subject matter would become so topical. I would prefer this not to be the case. But now it is more urgent than ever that we get out of the academia bubble. We also need to reach out to people who are far removed from academia in order to show them that our research helps to cure diseases, protect the environment, and also to defuse social conflicts, for example through gender research, amongst other issues. At our universities, we train the problem solvers of tomorrow and many of our start-ups and patents benefit society. This must be made visible. And last but not least, we must prove that our theoretical discussions and research work form the cultural foundations for the enlightened democracy of tomorrow.

As for the political tensions that keep flaring up on campus: I think it's not only good, but also necessary for personal development that highly controversial opinions can also be expressed on a campus – opinions that in turn motivate others to disagree. University management is responsible for regulating the discourse. We have clear boundaries in that regard, which are defined by our laws, in particular our free democratic basic order. But we have to endure anything that stays within the red lines, because that is exactly what universities are there for, *as well*: for objective controversy and an exchange of political ideas.

Ladies and gentlemen, that was a lot of worrying news. And despite that, you see a happy university president standing in front of you. Not just because of you, dear graduates. But also because the University of Potsdam has received a major donation from Hasso Plattner and his foundation, as many of you will have read in the press. Hasso Plattner has set standards with this. Standards for how a patron can serve the common good. Standards for what public-private partnerships in the academic sector should look like. Standards for how the institution of the public university can be strengthened through cooperation based on trust with donors such as Hasso Plattner. This benefits not only our beautiful university, it benefits not only my own subject, computer science and AI, no, it benefits the German and European scientific and academic landscape as a whole.

What exactly is going to happen? First of all, we are getting a new fourth campus on the historic site on Brauhausberg, in the heart of the state capital! Just a ten-minute walk from the main railway station, a state-of-the-art academic location will be created there in the next few years, which will have international appeal and where completely new forms of scientific work and knowledge transfer, new teaching and learning environments will be possible. The two large faculties currently based at Griebnitzsee – the Law Faculty and the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences – are to be relocated there. Secondly, at our Griebnitzsee site, the Hasso Plattner Institute and the Digital Engineering Faculty, which is a joint venture of the university and HPI, will be significantly expanded and developed. And thirdly, the campuses in Golm and Am Neuen Palais will also benefit from Hasso Plattner's major donation. This is because the proceeds that the state of Brandenburg receives from the Hasso Plattner Foundation from the sale of the land at Griebnitzsee will be invested directly in the long-planned construction measures at Am Neuen Palais and in Golm.

A private donation of this magnitude to a university – that is a first in Europe! Even in a global comparison, such large donations can be counted on one hand. We are extremely grateful to Hasso Plattner and his foundation for this! Because we very much appreciate such a commitment to the institution of the "public university", especially in these difficult political times.

I think that the ideals of the Enlightenment, which we live every day as a public university in a free democracy, are still attractive to many people – because they combine the freedom of the individual and consideration for others in a wonderful way and thereby create happiness in life. But I have learned one thing in my life: Democracy does not just happen on its own. Society – and that's all of us, by the way! – must make an effort to preserve the values of the free democratic order.

I have no doubt that you, dear graduates, will do just that with the tools you have acquired at the University of Potsdam. You can be proud to have obtained your bachelor's, master's or doctoral degree at our university. My sincere congratulations to all of you. The world is your oyster now. I wish you all the best for the future, good health, success and happiness for you and your families.