



The President's New Year's Address 2026

(Check against delivery)

January 21, 2026

Dear friends of the University,
dear colleagues,
dear students,

I have said this many times over the past weeks, but let me begin today by stating it once again: from a political perspective, 2025 was a difficult year. The military and social conflicts that were already dominating the global agenda a year ago have not eased—if anything, they have intensified. The world's most powerful nations no longer feel bound by international law. Political discourse has grown harsher, including here in Germany. And the hope that many of us in academia have long held—that a wise international science policy might help bridge divides between warring parties—has, at least for now, largely been disappointed. University campuses with which we work closely have become targets of military attacks—most recently at the Weizmann Institute in Israel and, just a few days ago, at Birzeit University in the West Bank.

And yet, there have also been bright spots. And despite everything, 2025 was a good year for the University of Potsdam.

The difficult situation in the United States has led top talent from around the world to look increasingly toward Germany and our European neighbors. We feel this here in Potsdam as well. In international comparison, the Berlin-Brandenburg science region is exceptionally attractive, both in terms of its density and its thematic breadth. Our English-taught master's programs are seeing strong interest because they combine three distinctive features: First, they are taught in English—meaning that students can begin their studies in Potsdam even without prior knowledge of German. Second, they meet the highest academic standards. And third, they are tuition-free—for anyone who qualifies for admission, regardless of where they come from. With these advantages, which are truly distinctive by global standards, we are attracting highly gifted, largely young people from India, Africa, South America, and increasingly, from the United States as well.

This is how talent is not only recruited, but retained. Already, about 50 percent of our international graduates remain in Germany after completing their studies and quickly contribute to the gross national product, the economy, and regional prosperity. They enrich our cultural life, strengthen public finances through taxes and social contributions, and help fill the gaps created by demographic change. According to a study published in 2025 by the German Economic Institute, the public costs of educating an international student are recouped within just two to five years after graduation.

Even more talented students will come—and stay—if we succeed in addressing the challenges associated with migration more quickly. We all know how difficult it is to find affordable housing in the capital region. For a young person arriving from abroad, it is nearly impossible to secure accommodation independently, especially from a distance. This is where universities and student services organizations must step in—by providing dormitory places before arrival and by building partnerships with private landlords. This is why we continually call for more student housing. Across Germany, only about ten percent of students currently have access to a dormitory. And this is why we also want to create

housing on our new campus at the Brauhausberg—both to address the housing shortage and, just as importantly, to help bring the new site to life.

Once students arrive, we must support them well. We have already accomplished a great deal here in Potsdam—my sincere thanks to our International Office, our Center for Languages and Key Competencies, our Student Advisory Services, and our departmental student committees. But there is still room for improvement, especially when it comes to “onboarding.” That is why we are planning a Potsdam preparatory program to provide new students with cultural and linguistic support—even though their degree programs are taught entirely in English. But we all know that cultural integration is just as essential, and that strong German language skills are crucial for later integration into the labor market. Our goal is therefore to ensure that all international students can quickly begin communicating in German.

Personally, I am convinced that the language barrier itself will soon diminish. We already have a wide range of translation software and interpretation headsets available, and we can expect major advances over the next one or two years. But even if AI-based voice-to-voice communication arrives—which it doubtlessly will, and at a high level of quality—we also know that it can only ever be a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for genuine cultural integration. That is why we continue to rely on traditional language instruction that fully incorporates cultural perspectives.

After students begin their studies, we will continue to support them based on individual needs. This applies just as much to German students, by the way. Let’s keep in mind that today, more than 50 percent of a cohort attends university—compared to only ten or twenty percent for many in this room. This diversity in educational background, gender, ethnic and national identity requires new approaches to teaching. Individualized, AI-supported online formats are therefore becoming increasingly important—as a complement to, not a replacement for, in-person teaching, which remains essential.

If 50 percent of our international students stay in Germany—perhaps even more in the future—what about the others? Some return to their home countries, others move on elsewhere. And that is a good thing. Many remain connected to Germany and Europe as ambassadors of goodwill, strengthening economic ties, cultural cooperation, and personal friendships. Especially in times like these, that is an invaluable asset.

This is something we experience first-hand here at the University of Potsdam. Our international partnerships are growing stronger every year—both in student exchange and in research. These flourishing global collaborations with institutes and universities worldwide are a key reason why we currently host four Collaborative Research Centers funded by the German Research Foundation. This puts us in a very strong position nationally. Ten years ago, we had none. Another area that has received particularly positive evaluations is our support of early-career researchers. Our long-standing strategy for attracting top talent early—at the master’s, doctoral, and junior professor levels—has been highly successful.

Allow me, for once, to mention a few colleagues by name, the spokespersons of our Collaborative Research Centers, in alphabetical order: Professor Ilko Bald has been with us in

Potsdam since 2012—initially as a jointly appointed junior professor with the Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing, and since 2019 as a tenured professor. He now co-leads, together with our colleague Matias Bargheer, the new Collaborative Research Center 1636, “Elementary Processes of Light-Driven Reactions at Nanoscale Metals.” Professor Melina Freitag joined us in 2019, coming from the University of Bath, where she had most recently served as a Senior Lecturer. Since 2025, she has led Collaborative Research Center 1294, “Data Assimilation.” Professor Doreen Georgi came to Potsdam from Paris in 2016 as a junior professor. She was promoted to full professor in 2022 and has since led our Collaborative Research Center 1287 on “Limits of Variability in Language.” And in Collaborative Research Center 1644, “Phenotypic Plasticity in Plants,” led by Professor Michael Lenhard, many colleagues in early career stages are already working as researchers and project leaders.

These outstanding careers demonstrate that our strategy for attracting top talent early has been 100 percent successful. This is how we will continue—through internationally oriented degree programs and open, theme-based recruitment that makes the University of Potsdam attractive to talent from all over the world and at every career stage.

This is also how excellent research becomes innovation. For many years, the University of Potsdam has ranked among Germany’s leading universities in knowledge transfer, with around 30 start-ups founded each year. And together with Berlin’s universities, in the newly established and federally funded JUNI Start-up Factory, we are ready step things up yet another notch.

Finally, a word about our new campus—I briefly mentioned the Brauhausberg earlier. In June 2025, we were pleased to announce that our friend and benefactor, Professor Hasso Plattner, would make a donation that sets a new global benchmark. With this gift, we will build a fourth campus on the Brauhausberg. From 2031 onward, our Law Faculty and our Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences will teach and conduct research there under state-of-the-art conditions. With the relocation of their 6,000 students, substantial space will be freed up on the Griebnitzsee campus—space that Hasso Plattner and the Digital Engineering Faculty, jointly operated by HPI and the University of Potsdam, will use for major expansions in computer science and artificial intelligence. For this, I once again extend our deepest thanks to Hasso Plattner and his foundation.

So, despite all challenges, there is no reason for despair. With colleagues, friends, and students like you, there is every reason for confidence. I thank you all for your support and wish you—and all of us—a productive and happy year 2026.