

New Years Reception Speech Translation

24th AStA of the University of Potsdam

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1 English transcript

**Speaker: Angelo Camufingo,
Department for Educational Policy and Teaching**

Dear Attendees,

As the general student committee of the University of Potsdam, we welcome you to this year's New Year's reception and wish you a happy new year. We would also like to take this opportunity to look back and inform you about challenges and tasks that await our university in the new year.

Everyday university life in 2020 has been significantly affected by Corona and we have all had a year of many challenges. We would therefore like to thank all the people who, under the circumstances, have worked tediously to make digital teaching as ubiquitous as possible. For example, we see the digital continuing education courses, introductory events and information platforms of the Study and Teaching team as supporting digital teaching and learning. Nevertheless, we hope that this change will result in a more conscious handling of students prerequisites and that we will work together to improve the circumstances.

We appreciate that, upon insistence, spaces have been made available for students to participate in digital teaching formats and we welcome the reliability of ZIM. We are also pleased that telephone consultation hours for student counselling have been introduced in the course of this semester and hope that these will be maintained during the semester break. Personal contacts in the student administration are particularly important between semesters. We recognise the challenges of the university administration, but we would like to see more empathy towards the student body and a more transparent way of dealing with bottlenecks and difficulties.

We would also like to see more empathy when it comes to housing. Every year we become more students. But with that come fewer places in the housing market and in dormitories! It seems paradoxical that a student housing is being demolished in such a housing crisis. A replacement that is still in the

planning stage does nothing to remedy the situation. In addition, international students are systematically disadvantaged. While dorms are reserved for Erasmus students, for other international students finding accommodation becomes a game of chance. For example, students have in the past been forced to stay in homeless shelters because they were refused dormitory places and could not find alternative accommodation!

The issue of construction and architecture remains a constant. More students, but too few dormitory and mensa places. More university advertising, but too little focus on student satisfaction. So opportunities like transforming the former bookshop into a long overdue student space are wasted in order to get a shop and advertise about commerce instead of student life.

And while on the one hand the idea of university expansion collides with a lack of common and work spaces, on the other hand we observe the fanaticism of fixed-term contracts on the level of teaching.

(Begin Video Recording)

Asya Mzee,
Department for University Politics

Discussions that are currently underway regarding the amendment to the Higher Education Act should of course result in a concept that includes the interests of all status groups, so we appeal to all students to approach us with their interests and suggestions in order for us to pass them on accordingly. The planned increase of teaching depots to 18 SWS will result in a decrease in teaching efficiency, which will lead to increased absences and burn-outs, and the negative effects will also be felt by the student community.

The work of the StuPa and the AStA is to represent and carry out the interests of the student community. That's why this year we want to increase our transparency in our work and also our presence in the student community.

Johanna Lagemann,
Department for Public and Press Relations

There is still an acute shortage of living space and mensa seats at the university, and yet it continues to expand. We want to criticise that.

Within the last 30 years, the university has cut down more than 300 trees for its expansion. We would like to see sustainability and ecological diversity not neglected for architectural ideals or financial effectiveness in the various construction ventures of the university.

The percentage of concrete covering the university campuses is shockingly high. At Griebnitzsee it is up to 80%. In the long term, such building practices are harmful to the soil, groundwater, and flora and fauna at the university sites.

**Clara Margull,
Chair of the AStA and
Department for Educational Policy and Teaching**

We are increasingly being approached by a wide range of university bodies to participate in concepts and projects. Examples are the mobility concept, the working group on planning measures for student health and the development of an inclusion concept.

Intersectional thinking is particularly important in relation to inclusion. The university must recognise that people experience multiple forms of discrimination. And take into account the intersection of discrimination sections in future strategy and policy development.

This currently includes developing alternative concepts to the often sought-after face-to-face exams during Corona and finding ways to enable all students with different health and personal prerequisites to take the exams safely and responsibly.

(End Video Recording)

**Angelo Camufingo,
Department for Educational Policy and Teaching**

The Brandenburg Higher Education Act stipulates in §3, paragraph 4, that non-discriminatory and equal participation in studies must be guaranteed. This also includes teachers and administration.

What does that mean for you?

On the one hand, we welcome the openness of various committees to give space to issues in this context. On the other hand, it is often precisely these topics that lead to extensive discussions or are ultimately talked down.

For instance, the issue of an all-gender toilet should not be downplayed by the fact that supposedly there are not many people who would use it; the importance of a more diverse and representative college at all levels should not be perceived as a chore for a quota; the desire for a room of silence not simply be hushed up; students' experiences of racism by teachers not be discredited as subjective perceptions; and the stubbornness of the administration in dealing with gender and names and the associated re-traumatisation of trans people should not be put on the back burner.

Being happy about more foreign students, listing better values in a quota of people with severe disabilities and having a higher percentage of women than last year are positive steps. However, these and many other people who are structurally disadvantaged and discriminated against must also be provided with a dignified and well thought-out environment for learning. This means, among other things, guaranteeing participation that goes beyond employment contracts or enrolment.

This is a responsibility that we all, including the student body, must fulfil. A responsibility that must find more space and voice in a revision of the Brandenburg Higher Education Act, and a responsibility that the university will hopefully be able to fulfil better thanks to Nina Khan and the Diversity Audit "Vielfalt gestalten".

Forms of discrimination such as racism, sexism, classism and many more are structural. They have a history that cannot be undone in two or three measures, but which requires consistent reflection, intersectional thinking and life-long learning from us; a history that has also been and still is shaped by Western universities; also by the way we deal with politics.

As described in Nature, 2020: Science and politics have always been interdependent. The decisions and actions of politicians influence research. At the same time, science and research inform and shape a range of public policies. Politicians influence the higher education environment and can ensure that academic freedom is preserved, and call on institutions to do more to promote equality, diversity and inclusion, and to give more space to the voices of previously marginalised communities. Politicians, however, sooner or later have the power to do the opposite.

The imperative of political neutrality does not mean that universities must be, let alone can be, free of politics. Nor should it mean that we thereby deprive people with experiences of discrimination of their life realities, that we cling to a fundamentally discriminatory norm society and that western universities continue to exercise epistemic violence.

Looking back at the last year, the AfD issue and the last New Year's reception, we would therefore like to repeat: The belief that one can be neutral in the face of oppression and racist, misogynist, xenophobic and other misanthropic ideologies and want to position oneself in a supposedly unproblematic middle ground is dangerously naïve, whether in university, state or federal politics.

Silence is also violence, and we hope that a university that is committed to non-violence will also break its silence.