



The President's New Year's Address 2021

- Check against delivery-

January 13, 2021

Dear guests, dear colleagues, dear students, ladies and gentlemen,

After decades of relative abstinence from politics, political issues are once again playing a role on the campuses of this world. We are seeing controversial political debates, we are seeing protests, we are experiencing a culture of debate. All of this is to be welcomed, because a university is not a space that is devoid of politics. On the contrary, as an essential part of civil society, it must facilitate diversity, freedom of expression, and respect for difference.

We also owe this to our students, especially at the University of Potsdam, a university which, not only for geographical reasons, feels closely connected to the ideas of the Enlightenment. This is precisely why our campuses must be and remain places for the free exchange of opinions. That has not always been the case in earlier times, especially here in Potsdam.

You are all aware of the topics that are on our minds these days: Apart from the coronavirus, climate protection also needs to be mentioned in this context, of course. The *natural sciences*, in particular, hold promising solutions to problems in both of these areas. We are also very much concerned about the way diversity is dealt with, especially at the universities themselves. Diversity in terms of religious and sexual orientation, in terms of ethnic, gender or national identity. This is where the *social sciences*, in particular, can help with their findings. Issues of poverty and wealth distribution, especially against the backdrop of increasing migration, are also giving us a lot to think about around the world. On this subject, the *economic sciences* provide interesting approaches to solutions. And the list goes on and on. Matters such as the challenges of genetic engineering, the future of mobility or the consequences of our energy transition almost seem to be old acquaintances to us.

All of these are – as already mentioned – complex problem areas, to which science can and must contribute to a considerable extent, perhaps even in an essential way. Knowing full well, ladies and gentlemen, that science alone cannot solve these complex problems. This also includes smart politics and a social discourse process that reflects on the scientific findings and applies them in accordance with our values – here in Germany, in particular, in accordance with democracy – and thereby achieves the necessary social acceptance. Precisely for this reason, ladies and gentlemen, because of the relevance of science on the one hand and its embeddedness in political and social framework conditions on the other, we must also be able to discuss these and other issues controversially at institutions of higher education.

This should go without saying. And yet this necessary freedom of debate is currently under threat from two sides.

Firstly, of course, due to the coronavirus. And secondly, because of the social currents that I would like to subsume in an ideology-neutral way under the term *opinion discrimination*. Let me briefly address these two threats and possible solutions.

First of all, the COVID-19 crisis. It is a lasting hindrance to the work of universities around the world and makes academic life as we know and value it virtually impossible.

To make this dilemma more bearable, we are increasingly hearing the platitude saying that every crisis also has its opportunities. I don't like that phrase because I think it trivializes the virus. Instead, I tend to associate the crisis with the "creative destruction" postulated by Joseph Schumpeter. With this term, the Austrian economist, born in 1883, narrowed in on his thesis, according to which destruction is necessary – and not a systemic error – for reorganization to take place.

Reorganization is indeed required to respond to the “destruction” caused by the virus. In academia, the terms “e-learning” and “home office” immediately come to mind. Digital teaching has gained enormous tailwind due to the crisis, because in many cases there is nothing else that can be done at the moment. The key now is to find the right mix of digital and face-to-face teaching – depending on the learning objectives, the subject-specific culture, the target group and, of course, the risk situation associated with the virus. A digital share of 75-100% that is currently in place everywhere is not convincing from a didactic – or social – point of view. But in the long term, I would expect a share of perhaps a quarter of digital elements, simply because digital formats have proven their worth in many contexts, also by doing justice to the increasing heterogeneity of our students. In the long term, the possibility to work from home will also become the norm at universities around the world. Professors have always been doing this anyway, but corresponding formats have also proven successful in administration during the crisis. The question as to what proportion is possible and expedient for which specific tasks remains, of course.

These questions and the challenges they present keep us on our toes, and that's a good thing, allowing us to wipe away the mildew that the virus likes to put on our lives. The temptation is all too great to somehow delude ourselves into thinking that we are doing our work “as normal”, despite the crisis. That much is true. We are doing our work and getting things done – left to right, without thinking about it too much. But that is not life as we know it. Our former life had been influenced to a large extent by randomness, by freedom, by creativity! By crazy thoughts, by ideas in the shower, by having a coffee with friends – in other words, by “serendipity”. This serendipity, which is what makes creativity possible in the first place, is often falling by the wayside at the moment. As a result, our assembly lines – fortunately – continue to run. But our creative drive, our ability to innovate are left behind. Universities in particular must take measures to counter this situation – because the longer a situation like this persists, the more difficult it will be to get out of it.

The virus also impedes international cooperation projects, but that makes it all the more important to pursue them nonetheless. The fact that many of us are happy to be living in Europe right now is encouraging. Nevertheless, the danger for Europe of being crushed between the totalitarian superpowers Russia and China and the United States, which is still in rough waters, flanked by conflicts with the United Kingdom, which is rapidly turning into a No-Longer-So-Great-Britain, should not be underestimated. All the more obvious is the challenge for universities to make their contributions in this respect. The University of Potsdam is involved in this process by way of its participation in the DAAD-funded program “Lehramt.International” and our role as EDUC consortium leader in the EU program “European University Alliances”. Internationalization plays an important role for us, as an integral part of university life. It is only in this international context that we can promote cosmopolitanism, intercultural exchange and a welcoming culture.

Secondly, let me say a few words about the problem of opinion discrimination, also referred to as “cancel culture”. I would like to start with a quote from our colleague Walter Homolka. Jewish theologian and Rabbi Homolka recently appeared on a Phoenix panel called “forum demokratie” alongside historian Manfred Görtemaker, who also teaches in Potsdam; the topic was “Pillars of Democracy – Church and Religious Communities”. Incidentally, in my role as President, I was, of course, pleased that two of the four panelists on this important topic were professors from the University of Potsdam. But that is not the point. The point is what Walter Homolka said on the topic of freedom of opinion. I quote:

“We had to learn, even though Mr. Görtemaker and I come from Potsdam, the cradle of the Enlightenment: Not everyone always feels comfortable faced with this requirement of human autonomy. That is a great and noble goal. Many people are actually quite content to be told what to do or which ideological theory to follow, sometimes however abstruse.”

Content to be told what to do. This may be in line with human nature in many cases, Walter Homolka is absolutely right. Nevertheless, this should not be the benchmark we use as we educate enlightened people at our universities. “Question Authority” must also be a motto in this context, but not in the sense of a dull dissent as seen among the “Querdenker” (or the QAnon) movement, but in the sense of an open exchange of insights and values and a subsequent personal and critical formation of social opinion.

In light of this, we can certainly agree that beyond teaching and research in the narrower sense, a modern university, as part of our civil society, must always be a place for open intellectual exchanges, too. This requires the courage for controversy and the establishment of a culture of debate that promotes this open exchange of opinions. This is the only way we can fulfill our obligation to impart modern enlightened values to our students in particular. This is the only way we can stand up to the populist and fundamentalist tendencies of our time. Because these tendencies do not arise and intensify abruptly, but gradually and insidiously. And every restriction of the open exchange of opinions, no matter which side of the political spectrum it comes from, will be a step towards the abyss.

This is precisely why it is so important to allow opinions that are deeply contrary to one's own. This includes more than tolerance for those who think differently, it includes lived controversy. I would go so far as to say that it is part of a good university education to listen to such dissenting opinions and discuss them. That, too, is part of a lived diversity – a diversity of opinions, that is. And that's why the openness of the university is so important to me.

Of course, there are limits to this. These are to be found whenever someone departs from the principles of the constitution – in Germany, that means the Basic Law – whenever someone strays from our liberal democratic basic order, whenever someone endangers others, whenever someone personally insults others or even resorts to physical violence. Such statements and behavior patterns must not be tolerated, and there is no doubt: We need to nip such things in the bud!

However, the boundaries are not always easy to define. Violence is immediately recognizable, personal insults are a bit more difficult, and when it comes to the question of who is – still – acting within the framework of our liberal democratic basic order and who is not, different interpretations abound.

Clarifying precisely this question is the responsibility of the Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Germany. In addition to the category of “suspected cases”, which is now well known from the press, individuals are also listed there as “proven extremists”. Indeed, these individuals have no business being on a university campus. Therefore, we will not invite these individuals to any of our events in the future, even though they may be elected representatives of the people in the state parliament.

Ladies and gentlemen, allow me to conclude with a few words about the state of the university. Our growth has continued unabated, despite the coronavirus, largely due to the continued support of our state government, for which I am sincerely thankful. We passed the mark of 22,000 students for the first time in the 2020/21 winter semester. But I will continue to emphasize that growth per se is not our goal. In fact, the goal is to strategically expand the

university, thus meeting societal and scientific challenges, while also improving the quality of teaching through more favorable student-teacher ratios.

Therefore, this increase in the number of students also includes a corresponding increase in the number of teaching staff members. With 31 professorial appointments in 2020, we have set another record in the history of the university in this regard. Overall, we are growing from 215 to nearly 300 tenured professorships. You can add a dozen newly established tenure-track professorships to that, all of which have been filled with outstanding young scientists. And, of course, the non-professorial teaching staff also continued to grow, both in terms of temporary qualification positions as well as permanent positions for continuous tasks that arise. Finally, let us not forget the roughly 100 jointly appointed professors who do the vast majority of their work at a Helmholtz facility, a Leibniz Institute, a Fraunhofer facility or a Max Planck Institute. There is no other German university with more joint appointments.

In terms of content, we are making good progress with the expansion of the teaching degree programs, among other things, and digitalization of the classroom, in particular, must be a priority in our teacher training. Very good progress is also being made with regard to our Faculty of Health Sciences, which is jointly funded with the BTU Cottbus-Senftenberg and the Brandenburg Medical School. We are extremely confident that the new Faculty, with its proven strengths in research and teaching, can also contribute to the development of university medicine in the Lusatia region. By the way, our contribution to the crucial development of Lusatia is also a financial one. In order to boost the development of the higher education landscape there, we have agreed to a temporary statewide reallocation of funds, which will cost us 2 million EUR per year. That's why we also have to take a step back from our original growth target – instead of 23,000 students, we are now planning on a target number of around 22,600. But this number also poses a challenge, not just in terms of attracting qualified staff, but also in terms of the extremely complex and sometimes frustrating issues of construction in higher education. Challenges that we are nevertheless happy to tackle, because they will not only benefit the University of Potsdam, but also the state of Brandenburg.

Ladies and gentlemen, 2020 was not an easy year for any of us. As I said, a normal academic life in the fullest sense of the word is simply not possible at the moment. But of course, it is not just the universities that are suffering from the pandemic, by any means. Many of our fellow human beings are even more directly affected than we are, either in terms of health or financially, and we need to express our sympathy to them. However, we are currently also seeing that science is revealing ways out of the crisis and that there is light at the end of the tunnel. I am therefore looking to the future with great optimism and looking forward to more meetings with you again – including personal ones! – in the new year.

Today, I would like to thank you, dear colleagues and friends of the university, very much for your commitment and your continuing dedication to our university. Thanks also to those who provide financial support by way of the Germany Scholarship, the University Society, or as donors. And a very special thank you to my team, the President's Office, our Press and Public Relations Department, and my colleagues on the Executive Board for their outstanding work. On behalf of the University of Potsdam and also on a personal note, I wish you and yours a healthy, happy and successful start to the year 2021!