

## **New Year's Reception 2026 President's Speech | Prof. Oliver Günther, Ph.D.**

Dear friends of the university,  
Dear colleagues,  
Dear students,

I have said this many times in recent weeks, but let me say it again today by way of introduction: 2025 was a difficult year from a political perspective. The military and social conflicts that were already virulent a year ago have gotten worse rather than better. The world's major powers no longer feel bound by international law. The tone of political debate has become harsher, even in Germany. The hope that we in academia have repeatedly cherished, that a wise foreign policy on science could bridge the divides between warring parties, has largely been dashed, at least so far. The campuses of universities with which we work closely are becoming targets of military attacks—as happened, for example, at the Weizmann Institute in Israel and a few days ago at Birzeit University in the West Bank.

Nevertheless, there were also rays of hope, and 2025 was a good year for the University of Potsdam.

The difficult situation in the US means that top talent from all over the world is increasingly interested in Germany and our European neighbors. We are also feeling this here in Potsdam. The Berlin-Brandenburg science region is extremely attractive in international comparison in terms of its density and thematic breadth. Our English-language master's programs are very well received because they combine three features: First, they are in English, which means that you can study in Potsdam even without knowledge of German. Second, they are of the highest academic standard. And third, they are free of tuition fees – for everyone who qualifies for admission, regardless of where they come from. With these truly unique selling points in a global comparison, we are attracting highly talented, mostly younger people from India, Africa, South America, and increasingly also from the USA to Germany.

This not only allows us to *attract* talent, but also to *retain* it. Already, around 50 percent of international students remain in Germany after graduation and quickly contribute to the gross national product, economy, and prosperity of our region. They enrich us culturally, strengthen public finances through taxes and duties, and help fill the gaps created by demographic change in this country. According to a study presented in 2025 by the German Economic Institute, the costs of studying financed by German taxpayers are recouped just two to five years after an international graduate completes their studies.

Even more highly talented international students would come to us and stay here if we succeed in addressing the challenges associated with immigration in a timely manner. We all know that it is difficult to find affordable housing in the capital region. For a young person who comes to us from far away, it is hardly possible to find something on their own, especially from a distance. This is where we, the universities and student services organizations, are called upon to provide dormitory places even before students arrive and to create options through cooperation with

private landlords. Hence our constant call for more dormitory places – in Germany, only ten percent of students have accommodation in a dormitory. Hence our desire to create living space on the new campus on Brauhausberg – which will also be a significant factor in revitalizing the area.

Once the young people are here, we need to take good care of them. We have already made a lot of progress in Potsdam – many thanks to our International Office, the Center for Languages and Key Competencies, the Student Advisory Service, and the student councils, among others – but there is still room for improvement when it comes to “onboarding.” That is why we are planning a Potsdam propaedeutic course in which new arrivals will also receive cultural and linguistic support, even though the course is taught entirely in English. But we all know how important it is to integrate culturally as well. And, of course, a good knowledge of German makes it easier to integrate into the job market later on. That's why we want to offer all students coming from abroad the opportunity to communicate quickly in German.

I personally am convinced that the language problem will be solved in the near future. There is already a wide variety of translation software and specially equipped headphones available, and a lot will happen in the next year or two. But we also know, of course, that AI-supported real-time voice-to-voice communication, which will undoubtedly come, and in very high quality, is only a necessary but not a sufficient prerequisite for cultural integration. So we continue to rely on traditional language courses that naturally and comprehensively incorporate cultural aspects. After the start of their studies, we want to continue to support international students in a needs-oriented manner. Incidentally, this also applies to German students, because the extreme diversity of our student body—I would like to remind you that today more than 50 percent of a year group are studying, whereas for many of you sitting here, it was ten to twenty percent at the time—this diversity in terms of educational background, gender, ethnic and national affiliation implies different needs when it comes to teaching. Individualized, AI-supported online courses are also important as a supplement to face-to-face teaching, which remains essential.

If 50 percent of our international students stay in Germany, and perhaps a few more in the future, what do the others do? They move on, some back to their old home countries, some to third countries. And that's okay, because as ambassadors of goodwill, many of them remain connected to Germany and Europe, which in the long term leads to a strengthening of economic relations, cultural cooperation, and personal friendships—an asset that cannot be overestimated, especially in these times.

This is also something we feel very concretely here at the University of Potsdam. Our international collaborations are growing stronger every year, not only in terms of student exchanges, but also in research, of course. The many flourishing relationships with institutes and universities worldwide are an important reason why we are currently very well positioned in national comparison with four DFG-funded collaborative research centers. Ten years ago, we didn't have a single one. Another area that weighs positively in the evaluations is our work with young researchers. The term “young researchers” has become somewhat frowned upon; people now talk about scientists in the early stages of their careers, but whatever the case may be, our strategy, implemented many years ago, of attracting top talent to the UP as master's students, doctoral candidates, or junior professors has been extremely successful.

As an exception, I would like to mention a few colleagues by name, the spokespersons for our Collaborative Research Centers, in alphabetical order: Our colleague Ilko Bald has been with us in Potsdam since 2012, initially as a junior professor appointed jointly with the Federal Institute for Materials Research, and since 2019 as a tenured professor.

Together with our colleague Matias Bargheer, he now heads the new SFB 1636 “Elementary Processes of Light-Driven Reactions on Nanoscale Metals.” Our colleague Melina Freitag joined us as a professor in 2019, coming from Bath, where she most recently worked as a senior lecturer.

Since 2025, she has headed the SFB 1294 “Data Assimilation.” Prof. Doreen Georgi came to Potsdam from Paris in 2016 as a junior professor. She was promoted to full professor in 2022 and has since also headed our SFB 1287 on “Limits of Variability in Language.” Numerous colleagues in the early stages of their careers are also working as scientists or project managers in the SFB 1644 “Phenotypic Plasticity in Plants” led by Prof. Michael Lenhard.

These outstanding biographies show that our strategy of attracting top talent early on is 100 percent successful. We want to continue in this vein – with internationally oriented degree programs and open-topic calls for applications that make UP attractive to talented individuals from all over the world and at different stages of their careers.

And this is how cutting-edge research can be consistently translated into innovation. For many years now, the University of Potsdam has been one of the most transfer-intensive universities in Germany, with around 30 start-ups per year. And in close cooperation with the Berlin universities in the jointly supported start-up factory called JULI, which has been funded by the BMW since last fall, we want to go one step further.

Finally, of course, I must mention our new campus, which I already briefly mentioned earlier. In June 2025, we were able to announce that our friend and supporter Prof. Hasso Plattner will be making a donation to the university that sets new standards worldwide. With this donation, we will build a new, fourth campus for the university. It will be located on Brauhausberg, where our Faculty of Law and our Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences will teach and conduct research in state-of-the-art facilities starting in 2031. The relocation of its 6,000 students will free up a lot of space on the Griebnitzsee campus, which Hasso Plattner and the Digital Engineering Faculty, jointly supported by HPI and the University of Potsdam, will use for massive expansions in the fields of computer science and artificial intelligence. Once again, we would like to take this opportunity to express our sincere thanks to Hasso Plattner and his foundation!

So, despite all the adversities, there is no reason to be pessimistic. With colleagues, friends, and students like you, there is no need to worry. I would like to thank you all for your support and wish you and us a productive and happy 2026!