

New Year's Reception 2022

Greetings - Allgemeiner Studierendenausschusses (General Student Committee), Viviane Triems | Transcript

Dear Attendees,

As the general student's committee of the University of Potsdam, we welcome you to this year's New Year's reception and wish you a happy new year. I am very pleased that you have found your way behind the screen after two years of the pandemic and that I have the opportunity to speak to you today.

2021 was marked by hopes, longing for an end to the pandemic and scientific excellence. The COVID vaccine arrived and gave us a summer to breathe easy. We were able to visit our families again, spend time with our friends late into the night, have a coffee at our favorite café, and even experience the university from the inside at the beginning of the winter semester. A moment that many students had eagerly awaited for one and a half years.

On the other hand, 2021 leaves a bitter aftertaste. Demonstrations whose symbolism took us right back to 1933, floods that tore the lives out from under people in western Germany, refugees freezing to death on the border between Belarus and Poland, racism and murder of Black Indigenous People of Color on the open street, a troop withdrawal from Afghanistan that cost many people their lives and resulted in an insane oppression of women and children.

But what do these points have to do with our University of Potsdam?

We are a location for science. We question the status quo and develop ideas further. We are the ones who are educated to be able to make a difference in our society, in research, in the world. When it comes to climate change, the German government has done nothing for too long. And even now, the coalition's plans are not enough to meet the 1.5 degree target. All democratic parties campaigned on climate protection and yet the federal government is not prepared to take a stronger line on climate protection. We continue to demand that the federal government give its all to achieve the goals of the Paris climate protection agreement. Now, there is always talk of promoting technology and the importance of research to protect the climate. What is not recognized, however, is that many students, the future researchers, live in difficult living conditions or simply cannot afford to study.

One problem is the supply of housing. The student residence halls fill up quickly, and for many the only option is to rent an expensive apartment or hope to find a place in a shared apartment. Especially for our international students, this is a big problem. Often they do not know where they can live after their arrival, whether they will get to stay in the residence halls and how long they will be allowed to live there. Thus, many students are facing several relocations throughout their studies. But it is not only the uncertainty of the housing situation that is a problem for international students. There are often problems with the extension of the visa. Less bureaucratic extension or longer visas are absolutely necessary so that students can fully concentrate on their studies.

Due to the pandemic, the university must demonstrate lasting adaptability. Between online, hybrid, and face-to-face teaching, instructors have to adjust their curricula, and students have to assess whether it's worth the risk to travel to the university. What's problematic about this is that policy decisions on

pandemic response have long disregarded the student perspective. There are no uniform regulations within the country and also not within the university. Instructors are encouraged to convert their formats to hybrid or online teaching, but are not required to do so. As a result, students often have to commute to the university in order to not miss subject material.

We are pleased that there are now many testing options, but would like to see more uniform regulations. We also believe that a stronger educational effort and campaign for COVID vaccination is necessary. Improving student health also includes providing free period products and establishing all-gender restrooms. We are very pleased that free period products are now available in 20 restrooms. This has been a long road that AStA has fought together with the departmental student committee for Math-Physics, the Equal Opportunity Commission, and the Student Parliament. In the future, we need to put a lot of effort into sourcing environmentally sustainable period products and making them available in every restroom. Likewise, not just one all-gender restroom should be available on each campus. They need to be ubiquitously available. Students cannot be required to run across campus just to get to the all-gender restroom.

Furthermore, the university must finally find a solution to move forward with name changes for trans and non-binary individuals in a non-bureaucratic and expeditious manner. Every day that people are confronted with a wrong name and a wrong gender entry is a day of discrimination. Our university cannot continue to allow this to happen.

Many of us go to work alongside our studies. Whether it's at a supermarket checkout, in a bar at night, or here at the university. In doing so, we are not paid enough. In addition, we are also affected by job cuts due to the pandemic. But fortunately there is financial aid through BAföG. The funding option for students. Or is that not the case? Only 11% of Germany's students receive BAföG. Many are excluded from the outset because their parents earn too much, they are in their second degree program or have exceeded the standard period of study. However, these requirements ignore the fact that there is no prefabricated pattern that applies to all students. The realities of our lives are as distinct as each individual person. As a result, we need a public funding option without hurdles.

To maintain Brandenburg's status as a science location, the connection to public transport also plays a major role. The interest group SemTix fought in 2021 for the preservation of the 365 Euro ticket, went into negotiations with the transportation company VBB, and sought talks in the ministries. During the pandemic, we support the VBB by paying for our semester ticket, although we hardly use public transport. However, VBB does not care about this. There was still going to be a price increase, although they announced for 2022 to keep all ticket prices from 2021. Except the price for the semester ticket. The intended price increase was justified with the need for funding for the means of transport and the route development. Ministries and state ministers did not come to our aid and only shifted responsibilities.

Thus, we students receive hardly any BAföG, must work up to 20 hours a week beside our full-time studies for wages that are too low, can only get an accommodation with difficulty or must move into an expensive apartment, we must cross the campus, in order to be able to go to the toilet and we are also asked to pay for the route development of the VBB. These are extremely adverse conditions for us as we are also given the responsibility to fight against climate change as researchers. We urgently need the support of the university as well as the politicians on the state and federal level to be able to cope with our studies!

Together with the university, we can promote climate protection by planting trees and establishing more vegetarian and vegan meals in the dining halls. Together with the university, we can fight against discrimination by promoting intersectional research, breaking down barriers, and living gender equality. Together with the university, we can stand up for a solidary semester ticket. And together with the university, we can stand up against right-wing misanthropic ideologies that promote hate and hate-mongering and deny the science we advance here.

Thank you.