



Universität Potsdam

# The President's New Year's Address 2023

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- Check against delivery -

January 25, 2023

Ladies and gentlemen, when we take a look at the reviews of 2022 published in recent weeks, there is a broad consensus: it was not a good year for the world. Corona continued to trouble us, although the situation improved significantly as the year progressed. Russia's invasion of Ukraine shook us morally and changed our understanding of the world profoundly. The war cost the lives of thousands of Ukrainians, and millions were forced to flee. In Germany and many other countries, gas and electricity prices rose sharply. And speaking of energy, the two-degree target, which Potsdam climate researchers helped set, is not looking good either.

Nevertheless, ladies and gentlemen, I think we can consider ourselves reasonably lucky in Germany. Despite a somewhat tighter budget, the vast majority of us do not have to go hungry or freeze. Federal and state governments have put together short-term aid packages for those who need help most. Despite the multiple crises, we have been able to work reasonably at the universities, doing research, teaching and transferring our findings to the private sector. The necessary increases in heating costs were largely borne by the state of Brandenburg, for which we universities are extremely grateful. Our students appreciate the fact that their universities not only provide them with intellectual services, but also with heating, which also makes sense from an economic point of view.

In my perception, these rays of hope in times of crisis have a very tangible effect on the mood of our students and faculty. You notice it when you are on campus and talk to people: the mood is good, we are not intimidated by the crises. Teaching and learning together on campus as a social space also helps emotionally not to let the unpleasant developments around us drag us down too much.

Let us not forget: A lively and fruitful university life is only possible when people come together on campus, when free speech is possible there at all times, and when tolerance towards those who think differently prevails instead of cancel culture. That this tolerance of those who think very differently hurts is in the nature of things, but it is an unavoidable consequence of the openness required in the academic sphere in particular.

As you know, I have dealt with this issue on many occasions. This question also moved us in 2022. Does a cancel culture even exist? Or is it an invention of paranoid old white men? I would like to quote the writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who is best known for her novel *Americana*. A few months ago, in her widely acclaimed Reith Lecture, she told of her childhood in Nigeria. When her parents had visitors, they always discussed things aloud, but when it came to the ruling military dictatorship, they whispered. She continued: "We would not expect this whispering in a democracy. Freedom of expression is, after all, the bedrock of open societies. But there are many people in Western democracies today who will not speak loudly about issues they care about because they are afraid of what I will call, 'social censure,' vicious retaliation, not from the government, but from other citizens." This kind of social self-censorship is dangerous, because it leads to the formation of opinion bubbles and prevents innovation and creativity. I have already observed this self-censorship in myself. One thinks certain things, but does not say them, although they seem quite open to debate. Often this is done as an expression of politeness; one wants to spare one's discussion partner. But how far can this form of restraint

go? A certain amount of confrontation is part of normal discourse.

Let me illustrate this with an example that again has to do with Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. In 2017, she had answered the question “Are trans women women?” by saying, “Trans women are trans women.” That this led to extremely negative reactions online will surprise no one here. But should this prevent us from discussing such questions at all? Certainly, both the statement “trans men are men” and the statement “trans men are not (real) men” are seen in extraordinarily divergent ways by different parts of society. Both statements - expressed publicly - would probably provoke a furious controversy. Already the discussion on the meta-level I am having here is likely to be controversial. At the same time: One must be allowed to have such discussions! Because they are part of our open and tolerant discourse. It goes without saying that care must be taken not to hurt others carelessly. But as we all know, it is part of a good culture of debate to allow criticism without taking everything personally.

With openness and enlightenment, universities can show what they are made of, especially in times of crisis: That they are socially engaged beyond their teaching and research tasks, for example, in dealing with refugee scientists and students. That they can react with agility to unexpected challenges, as in the almost complete transfer of teaching to digital space when Corona came upon us. That they are not just schools for older students, but places of internationally significant cutting-edge research. Innovative research with which they contribute to solving urgent societal problems, the “Grand Challenges” - for example, in the development of the BioNTech vaccine, which was a direct result of a university-based, DFG-funded research project, and just as much in the search for strategies in the fight against man-made climate change, in which many Potsdam scientists in particular are involved.

At the University of Potsdam, we will continue to promote cutting-edge research because it serves the common good. We are currently working hard to prepare for the next round of the Excellence Strategy. We plan to enter the race with three cluster applications: in the fields of climate and water, bioecology, and cognition.

In addition, the expansion of the teacher training program is progressing. Even though we are sorely missing an important comrade-in-arms here: As many of you know, our long-time Vice President for Studies and Teaching, Professor Andreas Musil, lost his battle with cancer on June 17, 2022. We miss him tremendously. His enthusiasm for modern teacher education should be an incentive for us to continue the work in his spirit. We are continuing to increase the number of available study slots, and we are strengthening the interweaving of teacher education on the one hand and empirical educational research on the other, which is typical for Potsdam. In this way, current research findings, especially in the area of digitization of the classroom, can flow directly into our degree programs. In this way, we also hope to inspire even more young people to study to become teachers. In the natural sciences in particular, there are unfortunately still far too many unfilled study places throughout Germany.

Our Jewish theology institute went through difficult times in 2022. Personal

misconduct, ad hominem attacks, and fundamental substantive differences on the question of how theology should be organized at a secular university have led to turbulence that has been sufficiently discussed in the press. We are not out of the woods yet, but let me at this point once again express my optimism that our model of Jewish theology will emerge strengthened from the disputes. Discussions about the future organization are still in full swing, but will come to a conclusion later this year.

Another open problem area is university construction. The expansion of our university is leading to space requirements that have not yet been nearly met. Space is needed on all our campuses - Griebnitzsee, Neues Palais, Golm and also Rehbrücke. The steep rise in commercial rents is an obstacle for us, but even more so is the fact that the construction of a new building in a public context can no longer be done within a ten-year planning and construction period. Here we need help from the state of Brandenburg. Due to the corona-related budget cuts, some of our construction projects have been pushed back by years. At this point, we urgently ask the state government for correction.

But I do not want to end on a negative note. The University of Potsdam continues to develop well, as many parameters show. For example, our efforts have once again been reflected in the latest university rankings. In the most recently published Times Higher Education (THE) ranking, we achieved a very respectable 23rd place among more than 400 German universities. Among the “young” universities, which are those founded less than 50 years ago, we are even ranked first in Germany.

None of this would have been possible without your support and cooperation. Let me therefore conclude by thanking all of you: our staff, our professors and our students for your exceptional performance and commitment in challenging times! I would also like to thank our alumni and friends for their solidarity and willingness to support us even in difficult decisions. Stay with us! Here’s to a good year in 2023 and to seeing each other again soon! The academic light shines brightly! Especially in times of crisis!