



The President's New Year's Address 2024

(Check against delivery)

January 17, 2024

Dear colleagues,

Dear students,

Dear friends of the University of Potsdam,

Ladies and gentlemen,

As in previous years, looking back at the global situation over the past twelve months can be discouraging. 2023 was another year of substantial crises. It is true that – thanks to science! – the COVID pandemic has been largely contained. Campus life is hardly affected by it anymore. But there are political crises that move us to our core: The agonizingly protracted war in Ukraine instigated by Putin. The cruel attack by Hamas on Israel and the consequences for the entire Middle East. An increase in anti-Semitic and right-wing extremist activities, also here in Brandenburg. And looming above it all: the climate crisis – which must not be forgotten in the face of all the other problems we are grappling with.

As president of an institution of higher education, I ask myself this question every day: What can institutions of higher education contribute to solving these problems? Our financial and human resources are limited. But we can make use of the power of the word and the mind. Through our teaching, we can ensure that future generations will also be able to respond to complex challenges in a reflective manner – thanks to the expertise acquired here and – just as importantly – thanks to the culture of discourse and the ability to critically analyze they have learned here. We can contribute to solving problems through our research. I would like to remind you, for example, of the breakthroughs achieved at German universities, which have led to new vaccines; to new strategies for dealing with the complicated situations in Ukraine and the Middle East; to the use of “genetic scissors” in the treatment of congenital diseases; to advances in cognitive research that enable people with serious illnesses to communicate their thoughts again. And finally, through transfer of our innovations into practice, we can make a very direct contribution to improving the living conditions for us all. Without the higher education institutions in Brandenburg, there would certainly be no local Tesla factory and no 6% economic growth. We want to continue in this direction; and this might include an innovative stock portfolio model in the near future, with which the University of Potsdam can support the many start-up companies that emerge from it year after year even more effectively, in compliance with European and national aid regulations.

Despite these successes of higher education institutions not only in Brandenburg, universities around the world are being criticized. In the US, three university presidents were severely criticized in front of the US Parliament in December for their university management in the context of the escalated Middle East conflict; two of the three have since resigned. A few weeks ago, Sabine Hark from Berlin’s Technische Universität presented her new book with the diagnosis: “Old structures and new requirements form a toxic mixture,” saying that universities worldwide are in a “free fall”. The press asks what to do “when hatred of Israel is taught at university” or university administrations “capitulate to the academic mob”.

The fact that we as universities are criticized and have to deal with this criticism constructively is part of daily business for an institution that stands for enlightenment and

controversial discourse like no other. And the fact that parts of the press have been under existential pressure for several years and therefore generate lurid headlines – “breaking news” – in order to get more clicks and motivate readers to break through the paywall is also not new.

But if you criticize universities as massively as in the examples I mentioned, then the question arises: What do you want instead? So a constructive vote of no confidence, sure: If you don't like a structure, what would be an attractive alternative?

Do we want a university where professors, university management, politicians, or the press determine what may or may not be said? Where people are only allowed to say what is currently considered mainstream? Do we want a university where external parties decide on research priorities? Do we want a society in which we dictate to the next generation what they have to study, what they can and cannot say and write?

My answer to these questions is a resounding no. I still believe that the positive overall outcome of the success story that is the university to date is essentially based on autonomy, academic self-administration, freedom of speech, freedom of research and teaching, and public funding. Incidentally, the latter is not a contradiction to the great success of private universities, especially in the English-speaking world, because large parts of research funding also come from the public sector in these countries. We have just seen from the examples of Harvard and Stanford that the role of private sponsors can also be problematic, especially in times of crisis, where freedom of speech suddenly seems to be dependent on the goodwill of said sponsors.

Autonomous, predominantly publicly funded universities make an indispensable contribution to the common good across the world. The emphasis is on “autonomous” and “predominantly publicly funded”. In countries like Russia and China, there is, of course, no “autonomy” to speak of. But things are also crumbling in other countries, and I would only like to refer to the extraordinary achievements of our Voltaire Prize winners, who have done great things in precisely such difficult situations to secure autonomy and freedom of thought and speech, or at least to slow down their decline. The autonomy of science and academia, of universities, is not an end in itself. It serves society, because only in autonomy can academic and scientific institutions develop their full potential and make the best possible contribution to the common good. It is the only way we can provide future generations with the tools they need to overcome the difficult crises that our world is still facing.

It goes without saying that there must also be red lines for freedom of speech. In Germany, these red lines are defined first and foremost by the constitution. However, violations of morality and personal insults are also red lines that must not be crossed. It is a constant challenge for university management to ensure this. But that is part of our job, and certainly not the least important. After all, when we define these red lines, we always have to go against parts of the press and the public.

Anything that does not cross the red line, on the other hand, just has to be endured. Even if you think it is terrible. In the spirit of the quote attributed to Voltaire, which I have already quoted here several times: “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.” On this side of the red lines, there is no cancel culture and no censorship.

Anything else would run counter to the enlightenment impetus to which we as universities should feel committed. Anything that does not cross the red line must be allowed to be expressed on campus and in public. We have taken appropriate precautions to ensure that this remains possible on our campuses and that everyone who makes use of this right to speak feels safe. I would like to thank our partners in the Office for the Protection of the Constitution and the police for accompanying us on this difficult path. Above all, thanks are also due to the university members themselves, the students and their representatives, the faculty and staff, for not being intimidated by negative external influences, but for clearly expressing their opinions in the lecture halls and also publicly, recognizing the red lines and, if necessary, demanding that their discussion partners adhere to them.

In this shape and form, the university model is also a model for the future. The global return of face-to-face teaching at the university post-COVID has shown that teaching and learning together on campus is still essential for personal development. The combination of research and teaching inspired by Wilhelm von Humboldt, among others, is anything but obsolete. Yes, you certainly will not “need” everything you learn on our campuses later in your career. But thinking outside the box, which is a skill that results from research-based teaching, is still a good preparation for tackling the difficult problems that future generations must – and will – master. This applies not only to undergraduate teaching, but also to further and continuing education and training, which we would like to focus more on in the coming years at the University of Potsdam. Particular attention will be paid to further training for teachers – an area that is in an acute state of disrepair in Germany.

A few last words on research: The climate crisis and COVID in particular have made it clear to many that science and academia always involve controversy and that current research is characterized by different, often conflicting hypotheses. If we already knew the truth, we would not need any more scientific studies. The fact that research is polyphonic should not, of course, be interpreted as arbitrariness. Its success becomes evident in the fact that from the many different hypotheses, one or a few will emerge that are supported by the vast majority of the researchers involved. And the resulting state of knowledge should be the one that is used by politicians as a basis for decision-making. We do not have any better way than that.

Top-level research, ladies and gentlemen, is an important locational factor for a state on its way towards great things, like Brandenburg. Scientists and scholars from all over the world come to Potsdam to work in our now four Collaborative Research Centers and the many Research Training Groups and research units. The fact that we doubled the number of Collaborative Research Centers from two to four was great news in December, which was then complemented a few days later by the Leibniz Prize for Prof. Herzsuh. Back in the spring, we received the good news of an Alexander von Humboldt Professorship for Prof. Stern, who will be joining us from Harvard. 2023 was still a great year for research at the UP despite the difficult global situation – thanks to everyone who contributed. And now let's keep our fingers crossed for our three applications for Clusters of Excellence: DYCOBE, the Potsdam Center for the Dynamics of Cognition & Behavior. IBE:CHANGE – Individual-based ecology for a changing world. And WaterExtremes – From Global Change to Local Risk.

Ladies and gentlemen, none of this would have been possible without your cooperation and support. Thank you very much for this and all the best for 2024! I am looking forward to many personal encounters and discussions with you - tonight and in the coming weeks and months. I hope we can continue to count on your support!