



The President's New Year's Address 2025

(Check against delivery)

January 29, 2025

Dear Colleagues,

Dear Friends of the University of Potsdam,

Dear Students,

Welcome to the University of Potsdam. First of all, I am very grateful that you have found your way here, knowing full well that the beginning of the year means many New Year's events and other invitations for you all. Tonight you have chosen the University of Potsdam, which makes my colleagues and me very happy, of course.

2024 was characterized by a difficult and complex political situation, which continues to be a topic of reflection on academic campuses around the world. The wars in Russia, Ukraine, Israel, and Palestine continue. America has voted, but the election result creates anything but optimism, just as the government crisis here in Germany leads to a feeling of uncertainty for many. In comparison, the election results in Brandenburg do not seem so bad. Even though over 40% of voters chose relatively new parties on the fringes of the traditional political spectrum, a government with a stable majority was formed. A government with many familiar faces, a government with which we, the institutions of higher education, will work constructively in the coming years.

Public institutions of higher education are required to be politically neutral in democratic countries – and for good reason. Neutrality should, of course, not be confused with abstinence from politics. Especially in difficult times, the university management's job is to create and safeguard spaces for open discourse. Higher education institutions in Israel did just that when they took to the streets in spring 2023 against the Israeli government's planned judicial reform. We happened to visit our partner universities in Israel and Palestine that week with a small delegation and witnessed the demonstrations in Tel Aviv. It will have been the last visit to the region for a long time, as we unfortunately know today, because a few months later a new Middle East war began with the brutal terrorist attack by Hamas.

We need academic freedom with spaces for an open exchange of ideas and controversial discussion, because it is precisely what allows us to openly discuss possible solutions for the pressing problems humanity is facing and to communicate them to politicians and society. That is why I welcome every panel discussion and every public lecture event on campus, even if I do not agree in the slightest with some of the guests. That is why I am always happy to read articles in the press about faculty or students at our university or to see some of my colleagues on one of the talk shows previously mentioned. I was delighted when I switched on the television on a recent stay in India and saw the face of a colleague from Potsdam on the screen as he gave viewers new insights into the Second World War in English.

However, I am growing more and more concerned about the various well-intentioned but ill-conceived attempts to restrict these important freedoms in the belief that this would help people who, for whatever reason, experience disadvantages or appear to be at risk in this regard. Even the ideas behind so-called "cancel culture" were intended to protect students from potentially disturbing matters – although one of the purposes of a university is to have constructive exchanges about potentially disturbing matters. But to do so, you have to be aware of these matters in the first place. It seems unhelpful to try to enforce mutual

appreciation by regulating discourse too tightly, as the recently presented draft of a law to strengthen higher education (“Hochschulstärkungsgesetz”) in North Rhine-Westphalia attempts to do. Mutual appreciation cannot be prescribed by law. Instead, it must be practiced, encouraged, supported, and modeled. It is therefore the core task of universities to convince our students and researchers of the relevance of mutual appreciation and a diverse and fair culture of debate. The German constitution, criminal law, and domiciliary rights provide efficient tools for the protection of marginalized groups, which we enforce in close cooperation with the domestic intelligence service and the police.

This also applies to the debate on anti-Semitism at universities that is still being conducted with much intensity. Despite various setbacks, the past few months have shown that, with good management, universities can act autonomously and competently even in this extremely difficult state of the discourse and guarantee an appropriate balance of interests. With our Equal Opportunity Coordination Office, which acts as a cross-sectional institution and focuses on diversity and anti-discrimination, we at the University of Potsdam have so far been very successful in this regard. Many thanks to Christina Wolff and her colleagues for that! More government regulation, even if it is well-intentioned, can even have a counterproductive effect in this case.

The idea of a public but autonomous university clearly distinguishes us from government-controlled universities in countries such as Russia or China. 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. And since we firmly believe that this is the right path, we also award the Voltaire Prize every year to researchers who have achieved great things in difficult situations in order to safeguard university autonomy and academic freedom of thought and speech.

What do all these seemingly internal academic discussions have to do with Brandenburg? Quite a lot, actually. After all, it is the combination of academic freedom and public funding that makes us, the public institutions of higher education, high performers and enables us to make a significant contribution to the prosperity, growth, and happiness of our communities. This was precisely the issue in Brandenburg when the dispute over higher education finances broke out a good ten years ago. Many of you may remember. Brandenburg's universities were by far the worst funded in Germany. Many policymakers, even at the highest level, only had a rudimentary understanding of what universities with high-performance research can do for a community like Brandenburg. Perhaps it was because many considered tourism to be our future.

All of this has changed for the good of our beautiful federal state. Clever economic and settlement policies led to remarkable growth compared to the rest of Germany – not only in the commuter belt around Berlin, mind you, but throughout the whole state. I feel confident in saying: This growth would not have been possible without efficient universities. With that in mind, the decision of the state government that took office in 2014 to increase annual net funding for universities and other institutions of higher education was not only good for teaching and research, but also an essential investment for the good of the state.

A look at Berlin shows that this is not a matter of course, where a senate focused on austerity is forcing institutions of higher education to make dramatic cuts. Why are they doing this? One explanation is that the different time frames for planning in politics on the one hand and academia on the other mean that politicians often hesitate to make long-term and sustainable investments in research. Because the money is due now, but the results can take years, sometimes even decades. There is a lot of temptation to just cut a few million euros from the current budget or simply freeze university construction projects in hopes that the ceiling will not be collapsing over our heads any time soon – although, as you might know, this is exactly what happened at TU Berlin just recently.

I am therefore all the more grateful to Brandenburg's state government that it will continue on its chosen course despite the equally difficult budget situation. And you all know that I am not saying this primarily from a university perspective, but out of concern for the long-term development of our federal state. Cutting-edge 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. Many of them stay here long-term, as do many highly talented students from all over the world who enroll in our English-language master's programs in Potsdam. And many a scientist or scholar later founds a company – in Brandenburg!

However, our research focuses are not only suited to Brandenburg, but also to the global challenges. Let me give you a few, albeit non-exhaustive, examples.

Advances in artificial intelligence are keeping us all on our toes. In just a few years, for example, a button in our ear or in the frame of our glasses will translate almost every spoken language into our native language and vice versa in real time. Incidentally, this will also prompt us to critically assess the role of foreign language teaching in schools and universities. We should not just leave such developments to other countries. We will therefore continue to expand in the fields of artificial intelligence, linguistics, and cognitive sciences, also thanks to the ongoing financial and curricular support of the great Hasso Plattner and his foundation.

Our environmental, geosciences and climate sciences are also facing up to the respective challenges and helping to shape our energy transition in a sustainable way. When using solar and wind energy, average values are not really helpful as long as there is simply not enough energy produced for the whole country in case of wind/solar lulls. We need to think about battery technologies for this or – generally speaking – about converting the electrons produced by the sun and wind into molecules that can be stored and transported with more ease. The University of Potsdam is also conducting research in this area, above all in our Faculty of Sciences.

The topic of health will not only play a role in our Faculty of Health Sciences, which is jointly funded with the Brandenburg University of Technology and the Brandenburg Medical School and has just launched a degree program in "Public Health, Exercise and Nutrition". The Digital Engineering Faculty, jointly funded with the HPI, also deals with matters of health, as do the Faculty of Human Sciences with its university outpatient clinic and the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences with its research into health economics. The relevance of an

interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary exchange of ideas, across faculty boundaries and with our partners in non-university research institutions, in politics and business, and in civil society, becomes very evident when dealing with complex topics such as health.

Let me conclude by thanking everyone who has contributed to our successes. Thanks to the many individuals who push the university and thus society to new levels on a daily basis with their teaching, research, and transfer activities. Thanks to the students and their representatives, the AStA council and the student parliament. Above all, thanks are due to my colleagues for not being intimidated by criticism, and for clearly expressing their opinions instead, both in lecture halls and publicly, while respecting the red lines defined by the applicable laws and common decency and, if necessary, demanding that their discussion partners also adhere to them. Thanks to our staff councils and various boards and committees for their extraordinarily constructive cooperation, despite many a controversy. Thanks to our Center for Information Technology and Media Management (ZIM) for its masterful defense against an attack that threatened our IT systems a few weeks ago. I would like to mention a few names here, that of our CIO Dr. Peter Kostädt and three of his colleagues: Dirk Bußler, David Kotarski, and Paul Voß. You did a tremendous job! Thanks to our Chancellor and the two Vice Presidents for making our team a great one. And finally, thanks to my team in the President's Office and our Press and Public Relations Department, headed by my colleagues Dr. Scharioth and Dr. Engel, not only for having my back, but also for organizing fantastic events like today's several times a year without complaint and in a highly professional manner.

Ladies and gentlemen, an artist whom I greatly admire, the jazz musician Miles Davis, who died in 1991, once said to a younger colleague: "Lad, if you want to become a good jazz trumpeter, you can't play the notes on your sheet. Don't play what's there; play what's not there yet." I would like to conclude my speech with the same advice to my colleagues, especially the younger ones among them, but also to all of you. Do not waste your life just playing the notes you find on your sheet every morning. Don't play what's there; play what's not there yet! Contribute new ideas to societal debates, use your creative freedom – even if it leads to headwinds. That is what universities are there for, and in the midst of such headwind, at the bow with our foreheads in the spray – that is how universities can do the most to benefit the common good.