


New Year's Address

by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft

Professor Dr. Peter Strohschneider,

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- Check against delivery! -



Honourable Ministers, Senators, State Secretaries,
Distinguished parliamentarians,
Excellencies and esteemed members of the diplomatic corps,
Presidents and Chancellors,
Dear colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the annual New Year's reception of the DFG! It is our honour and my pleasure to celebrate the beginning of this still-young year together with all of you. And I would like to take this opportunity to wish you a very happy new year, and that fulfilling moments and enriching discussions may carry you through it. And perhaps this evening's conversations will already get you off to a good start.

Before I go any further, please allow me to extend a very warm welcome to our guests and partner organisations from abroad. It is a pleasure for us to have you here tonight, and I wish you all the best for the coming year. Your presence here is truly appreciated by the DFG as evidence that our partnerships build on common grounds, and I thank you for your goodwill and support in promoting international cooperation.

Distinguished guests, dear friends and partners of the DFG,

It has become a tradition in recent years to take this moment — albeit embedded in the ceremonial framework that befits the occasion — to bring up a few ideas of a more fundamental nature and thus to discuss some current issues in research policy.

I will leave it open whether this convention is a beloved custom or a bad habit. Because either way: What we grow accustomed to and what we make a habit of is difficult to get away from. That's just the force of habit. And the force of habit is not very conducive to research. Because research aims to defy our expectations.

If the DFG were a research organisation, it would behove us to break the force of habit and its expectations for once and to comment on something other than the research policy issues that have changed little over the years. However, we are not a research organisation; we are a research funding organisation. The DFG kicks off this year's round of New Year's receptions in the research and research-policy communities. How could I abandon this old habit just now? How could you — at this of all times, when many can hardly wait for the imminent decisions on the Excellence Initiative — expect anything other than the usual?

The force of habit, then. Which, by the way, is a comedy. And I confess, over the last six, twelve, eighteen months, I have been reminded again and again of this comedy by Thomas Bernhard, and of the brilliant Bernhard Minetti in the role of ringmaster Caribaldi — whenever conversation turned to the Excellence Initiative, and whenever reliable information on its further development was expected from the President of the DFG.

What was I supposed to say? I felt like the circus artists in *The Force of Habit*. For 22 years, the ringmaster and his artists have been practicing to perform Schubert's Trout Quintet. Day after day they meet for rehearsal, and day after day they have to abort it. They never get to the finale. But without a successful rehearsal, there can be no success. And no performance either.

Thomas Bernhard's play, of course, reflects society and life in general. It is about power and art, about tentativeness, unfulfilment, failure. And about waiting. We see a circus ensemble as a piano quintet, and both in a limbo — neither here nor there, stuck in seemingly endless iterations of tentativeness, between auspicious announcement, unfulfilled expectations and empty waiting.

Nearly fifty times we hear them exclaim the utterly erratic phrase: “Tomorrow in Augsburg!” – “Yes, tomorrow Augsburg!”

And I’m bringing up this bitterly comical play by the astute and eloquent Austrian misanthrope Thomas Bernhard because I was always tempted (and sometimes still am) to answer the question “What happens next with the Excellence Initiative?” with “Tomorrow in Augsburg!”

And so we — researchers, universities, research organisations, the general public — we wait.

Thirteen months ago, the heads of the federal and state governments announced in a resolution, which the DFG explicitly welcomed, “a new joint funding initiative in the near future.” Today, we are still looking forward to it even though its “funding options differentiated by objectives and funding formats”¹ haven’t become any clearer during the wait. How will research policy make good on its claim to strengthen research in Germany for the long term? “Tomorrow Augsburg!”

That’s how it went for a long time — too long, considering the response times and planning horizons of research and university development.

But: The wait is coming to an end.

A year has just started in which important decisions will have to be made regarding the federal–state initiative; decisions that might not come easy given the complexity of the academic research system and the heterogeneity of political interests, and that will be instrumental in shaping the general research system far beyond the next decade.

In two and a half weeks, an international commission of experts, headed by Dieter Imboden, will report on the impact and possible consequences of the Excellence Initiative; and by June, at the latest, a coherent general concept for the announced federal–state initiative will have to be negotiated.

The time pressure will therefore hardly be lower than the pressure of expectations. “Tomorrow in Augsburg!” won’t do anymore. And so it may not be unreasonable for me to remind you of

¹ Prime Ministers’ Conference: Resolution on a New Federal–State Initiative (Successor to the Excellence Initiative). 10 December 2014.

a few principles that guide the activities of science, academia and politics in their shared responsibility for higher education and research in Germany, and that make the academic research system powerful.

One of these principles has long been the division of labour within the research system. It integrates a multitude of different knowledge areas, types of research, and teaching methods, and it is supported by brimming organisational diversity. In this structural pluralism lies a particular strength: It creates space for work on a variety of scientific tasks and task types; it allows for a high degree of division of labour and functional complementarity; it is thus a prerequisite for the — on the whole — remarkable performance level and performance density of German research, for its inventiveness and innovation, and it allows that wealth of social, economic, political and cultural functions of research to unfold which research-policy utilitarianism tends to sell short.

That said: Division of labour and functional complementarity require that the academic subdivisions of the entire system are in balanced cooperative relationships to each other. Imbalances, asymmetries and disparities put the success of the system at risk.

And it's not as if we're immune to such risk. Just think of the erosion in core funding for higher education and academic research; of the trend, which has been apparent for years, that particularly high-performing research structures seek to break away from universities; or, turning our gaze from our federal republic to Brussels, of the — I'm afraid: very real — risk that Europe could return to the truncations of a research policy that limits itself to short-term innovation support.

We can certainly talk about a European Innovation Council. The reasoning, however, that it constitutes a necessity, because the ERC promotes only research, reveals an ideology that ignores another principle of successful German research policy. It says that smart research policy, on the one hand, must always consider society's expectations of science and academia, but that, on the other hand — and especially if it is to meet these societal expectations — it must not lose sight of the inner logic of research and higher education.

In our social practice, this principle is manifested, inter alia, in strong research organisations and in close and trusting cooperation between research and politics — with distinct domains, to be sure, but with shared responsibility.

This applies to the improvement of the situation and outlook of those who bear much of the brunt of academic research and higher education in our country without having adequate job security. The recently amended Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act, the envisaged federal–state programme for early-career researchers, as well as necessary differentiations of the personnel structure at universities would, in combination, be able to make a significant contribution to this.

Similarly, these principles also apply to the competition that will succeed the Excellence Initiative: Functional differentiation of the academic research system, balanced cooperative relationships between its elements, respect for the inner logic of science and academia in advancing their development.

In recent decades, these principles have supported, time and time again, the shared responsibility of the federal government and the states, of policymakers and the research community — with considerable success. It makes a lot of sense to abide by these basic principles as we implement the new federal–state initiative that seeks to “maintain and expand”² the dynamic development of the research system that has been triggered by the Excellence Initiative.

The resolution of December 2014 lays out the appropriate framework for this. It conclusively states that the new initiative, like the previous one, should aim to strengthen higher education institutions by promoting the best research, prioritisation, and collaboration within the research system. It correctly points out the factual connection between competition objectives, funding instruments, procedures and finances. With good reason, it calls for “a science-driven selection process that promotes transparency and acceptance of the selection decisions within the research community”.³

Defining the funding architecture and decision processes that can meet these requirements of the new federal–state initiative will be the subject of political negotiations over the coming months, and the results will then have to be implemented in trusting cooperation between policymakers and the research community. But it can’t be seriously disputed that the design of the new competition will likewise have to be approached with substantive funding goals in mind. Neither should it be merely a matter of just giving universities more money, nor should the actual functions of funding be subordinate to the distribution of resources.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Finances, after all, are the means, not the end. The end is rather to improve the conditions for top-level research in universities, and thus to strengthen the performance of academic research as a whole.

And therefore, in spite of everything that still needs to be negotiated over the coming months, we can say this much with good reason:

One central element of the new federal–state initiative will have to be, once again, a special funding instrument specifically for the very best research in universities. In this regard, the DFG proposed last year an enhanced funding line, so-called centres of excellence, which met with considerable agreement from researchers and politicians.

Furthermore, there will continue to be a need for an institutional competition between universities. How to optimise its design, however, is still largely unclear.

It is clear to me, however, that the new funding lines should be designed along the cornerstones that made the previous success of the Excellence Initiative possible.

These include uncompromising standards of quality; the openness of the competition to the whole range of research areas and research topics; options both for previously funded projects and for new proposals to compete; funding periods that may extend beyond normal project durations; and — last but not least — a decision-making system which itself must meet the highest quality standards, fit the architecture of the funding lines, and lead to science-driven funding decisions on the basis of scientific quality judgments.

This last point seems to be self-evident. Nevertheless, I'm emphasising it for a reason: A selection process can be called "science-driven" only if it clearly prioritises the scientific and academic quality of proposals over all other considerations — including criteria aimed at proportional representation of academic disciplines or geographic regions, or at political priorities, no matter how legitimate such criteria may be.

In other words, the purpose of prioritising science-driven criteria is not to ensure minimum standards, but to select the very best concepts and projects.

The DFG is emblematic of this approach. In its funding activities, it implements the principles of clear and fair science-driven procedures in awarding research grants that — I dare say —

are generally acknowledged to be a very high level. The DFG cannot and will not deviate from these principles and the quality standards they entail.

This implies, incidentally, that modifications to the procedural rules for the new federal–state initiative would be justifiable only in cases when it comes to funding commitments that are of unlimited duration. And even in these cases, scientific dignity and political legitimacy would have to be balanced out, if only to ensure acceptance of the competition as a whole.

Ladies and gentlemen,

“Tomorrow in Augsburg” — it can’t come to that, and it won’t. The wait in a state of unfulfilled tentativeness, which, notwithstanding many other achievements in research policy, has defined the past few months as far as the Excellence Initiative is concerned — that wait is coming to an end. Within the next half-year, the federal government and the states will have to find common ground — for the benefit of the research community and the society that supports it.

The resolution of the heads of government outlines the principles for this. We see it also as an acknowledgement of the best practices of the DFG and as an expression of the confidence that research policymakers place in one of the most important quality assurance mechanisms for German research overall. We will do our utmost to continue to justify this confidence going forward.

I wish all of you, the organisations you represent and your employees, the very best, and a fulfilling 2016!