

## **New Year's speech by the President of Leibniz University Hannover, Prof. Dr. iur. Volker Epping, 8 January 2021**

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish you all a happy and – above all – healthy new year. I am delighted that you have joined our virtual New Year's reception at "Königlicher Pferdestall". 2020 proved to be an extraordinary, eventful, but also busy year for all of us. Our professional and private lives are still heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past 10 months, we have faced tremendous challenges. Despite the adverse conditions, we have continued university life at LUH in a professional and optimistic manner under the given circumstances – so thank you all for your commitment.

I would like to take a look back with you on a very special year 2020, but I would also like to look at what lies ahead of us in the new year that has only just begun. In the past year, we mourned the loss of university members and personalities closely connected to Leibniz University Hannover. Allow me to mention Professor Hinrich Seidel at this point. The former rector, president and honorary citizen of our university passed away on 18 February 2020 aged 88. Between 1975 and 1977, and again between 1979 and 1997, Hinrich Seidel managed our university with great foresight. His work continues to bear fruit to this day. He promoted internationality, interdisciplinarity and collegial projects. Leibniz University Hannover is much indebted to him – he made an outstanding contribution to our university in many different ways. We miss him. I still deeply regret that we were unable to say a proper farewell in these times.

Ladies and gentlemen, this year's New Year's reception speech is different from previous ones as this is the first (and hopefully last) time I am required to deliver it from somewhere other than the atrium of the main university building and without an audience present. However, it is also different because it focuses on the first year of my second term as President. For this reason, I will also touch upon the objectives I set when I assumed office in 2015. What have we achieved? Where do we need to deviate from the course we set? Where will our journey take us in the next few years? Where will Leibniz University Hannover stand in 2031, on its 200th anniversary? Don't worry, this will not be an endless speech. I will be brief and focus on the key aspects.

I would like to begin with the past year. Last year, three impressive construction projects were started at Leibniz University Hannover. Since last May, a modern centre for teacher training is being built in the northern part of the city – the Leibniz School of Education. Construction work is scheduled to be

completed by the end of 2022. Campus Maschinenbau in Garbsen is continuing to grow; the new SCALE building currently under construction will be a modern hotspot for research on more efficient and more sustainable manufacturing methods for large components used in wind turbines, aircraft or ships. Construction work is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2022 here as well. The building will be sustainable too: we will install a photovoltaic system on the roof. In a way, that system will serve as a prototype for all of our roofs, which we intend to utilise for electricity generation where possible. Our third large-scale construction project is the expansion of the Large Wave Flume in Marienwerder, also scheduled to be completed by 2022. Over the next few years, the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy will provide funding for the construction of the largest test facility for the combined analysis of exposure of maritime structures through swells and currents in Germany.

The prospect of another upcoming building project was a cause for celebration in the summer. Following the recommendation of the German Council of Science and Humanities, the Joint Science Conference approved the construction of the research building Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies of Science. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly revealed the essential role of research in the overall development of our society. In this regard, defining the benefits and limits of science is particularly important. The research branch of interdisciplinary studies of science focuses on such challenges within the scientific system.

However, the university's expansion driven by the high number of students and successful research also requires funding. Unfortunately, this has been a recurring item on the agenda of my New Year's speeches over the past six years, as well as in those delivered by my predecessors. Providing the infrastructure necessary for a growing university is imperative. Inevitable changes to our working routines, such as transferring lectures to online and hybrid formats in the past year, resulted in additional costs. The digitisation of our services must continue, which requires funding as well. At the same time, since the beginning of last year, Leibniz University Hannover has had to cope with significant cuts in government funding due to reduced expenditures. However, they are merely the straw that breaks the camel's back. And I do not even want to address the coronavirus-related cuts, which, apparently, have already been passed but have not yet been confirmed for the individual departments and facilities. For despite all cost increases, the university's basic budget has not been adjusted over the past 15 years, apart from pay rises initiated by the federal state. This becomes particularly obvious when you look at electricity costs, which have quadrupled within that period of time. As you all know, this applies to almost all other costs, in particular building and facility management. All of this makes the situation considerably more dramatic than the reduced state spending alone; even more so as the coronavirus pandemic has shattered our hopes for a substantial government refurbishment programme we had worked towards for almost ten years.

Therefore, the financial gaps cannot be compensated by "cosmetic" measures. The university will be forced to make steep cuts to many programmes; painful personnel reductions will be necessary. Our overall goal is to keep up the university's core responsibilities in order to maintain the working

capacity in research and teaching at the highest possible level. In this context, the ability to appoint new professors will be essential in attracting and retaining excellent researchers. After all, personnel cuts are also always a signal to politics that financial cutbacks come at a heavy price, resulting in a limited study programme and fewer university places. How does the state picture the future of its higher education institutions? What is its vision for the next ten years when there is a general consensus that the future viability of our country can only be safeguarded by a knowledge society driven by science? And I am asking the state parliament and government directly: What is your vision for Lower Saxony's future viability?

We will continue to look ahead. Before taking a look at the future, I would like to express my gratitude to all members of our university for their extraordinary efforts in the past year. With outstanding commitment, you overcame the challenges brought about by the pandemic that we had to deal with alongside our regular daily business. And not only that: you made sure that the university proved itself as a well-working social institution. As one of many examples, let me point out that students enrolled in teacher training courses visited schools during the first lockdown in order to help pupils cope with unfamiliar digital learning activities. However, they also went shopping for and took care of more vulnerable people. Thank you very much for your tireless efforts! It makes me feel very optimistic about the things the New Year will bring for us as a university but also as a society.

Ladies and gentlemen, we need to ask ourselves how we can future-proof Leibniz University Hannover. The external review from the Excellence Strategy is an important basis for our strategic orientation. It clearly points out the existing potential for institutional innovation. Our internationally competitive research infrastructure and outstanding scientific achievements provide a solid foundation for us to build on. We are likely to establish ourselves among the top 20 universities in Germany if we put our expertise to use. That is why we already started developing our overall strategy LUH 2031 at the end of 2019. LUH will turn 200 in 2031. It is a venerable anniversary, but also a goal that requires some hard work. When I assumed office six years ago, I stated that I would take responsibility for leading this university and for ensuring top-quality teaching and research. The duties assigned to me were – and still can – only be planned to a limited extent. The areas of work I consider important – integration, representation, strategy and management – are still vital. LUH can only prosper as a whole. We always strive to involve you in our plans for the future, just as we did with our overall strategy LUH 2031. You had the opportunity to actively participate in the work group established to this end by the Senate and Presidential Board – and you did. I aim to establish Leibniz University Hannover as one of Germany's universities with a strong research capacity. In doing so, I want us to address major social challenges and incorporate them into our teaching activities. We need to increase the visibility of and fully tap into our potential in research, teaching and transfer in order to make the university an internationally appealing place of knowledge generation and knowledge transfer. I will continue to hold the helm firmly, and allow me to use the seafarer's metaphor again, just as in my inaugural speech. As President, I am the helmsman and the engine that drives changes necessary for the optimisation and strategic

orientation of our university, which should, of course, be supported by the majority of all members.

So I am hoping to get your support in a current matter: The scientific commission of Lower Saxony has called upon all state-run higher education institutions to consider the implementation of the Lower Saxony foundation model in light of its benefits. In order to gain greater autonomy for Leibniz University Hannover, the Presidential Board initiated a university-wide process for discussion on the matter last year. The foundation model provides more leeway in many areas. It allows for more effective long-term planning with regard to strategic issues. And it promotes our independence in establishing professorships, including the right to change salary scales, to name but a few advantages. The foundation model also protects us: Budget or recruitment freezes imposed by the Minister of Finance during the fiscal year would no longer be possible. As the new Presidential Board, we will continue the process for discussion, which is open to all university members, in order to get everyone involved through transparent communication. Implementing the foundation model would benefit the university and therefore us all. This is something we need to illustrate and a view you also need to share. For the foundation model also requires your support.

This leads me to my new team, which I would briefly like to introduce. First, I am pleased to note that Christina von Haaren, Faculty of Architecture and Landscape Sciences, was not only re-elected as Vice President for International Affairs, but will also be responsible for sustainability at LUH. It is her second term as member of the Presidential Board. Joachim Escher from the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics was also reappointed. It already is Mr Escher's third term as Vice President for Appointments, Human Resources and Continuing Education. Moreover, we will also have continuity regarding the position of Senior Vice President, as Christoph Strutz will remain a part of the Presidential Board. Julia Gillen from the Faculty of Humanities, director of the Leibniz School of Education, was elected as Vice President for Teaching and Academic Programmes following the retirement of Elfriede Billmann-Mahecha in January 2021. Holger Blume from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science was elected as Vice President for Research and Transfer following the retirement of Peter Wriggers. I would like to thank these colleagues for taking on those responsible and demanding positions. I would also like to thank the Senate and the University Council for unanimously approving my recommendations regarding the members of the Presidential Board. This demonstrates both the high acceptance and the considerable expertise of the candidates and the team. I look forward to working together with everyone. The first few meetings we had last year already showed that we get along well and will form a great team. We all have the same or similar ideas and objectives as to the development of our university. With regard to my new term as President, I am very confident that, as a team, the Presidential Board will be able to tackle challenges and seize new opportunities.

On behalf of Leibniz University Hannover but also on behalf of myself, I would like to express my gratitude to Ms Billmann-Mahecha and Mr Wriggers for their dedicated, always trustful, constructive and open collaboration. I wish them all the best for the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, the past year at Leibniz University Hannover was defined by the consolidation of tried-and-trusted systems, the tackling of completely unfamiliar challenges, future developments, highlights witnessed and a great deal of solidarity in difficult situations. There is one last important message I would like to share: The pandemic has shown us how important the gift of scientific freedom is. We need science to overcome the pandemic. The RKI press conferences and the recommendations of virologists and epidemiologists have become an integral part of our everyday lives. Scientists and researchers are working flat out to develop the right medication and vaccines that may save many lives. As scientists but also in our capacity as responsible citizens we must take responsibility. We are all required to take a stand against false claims and unscientific lies. The freedom of speech as well as the fundamental right to freedom of research and teaching must be protected. However, that right is also an obligation not to abuse or use it to lead others astray under the cloak of scientificity. It is important that opinions in our society as well as in political decision-making processes are formed on the basis of scientific evidence. This also means that reasonable doubts and continuous findings must be expressed in science.

Furthermore, it is depressing to see that scientific freedom is being restricted in many places all over the world. We must take a stand against this and also voice solidarity with persecuted scientists whose work is being obstructed.

Ladies and gentlemen, on this note I would like to wish everyone a happy and healthy new year 2021, especially in light of current challenges. Please remain confident and take care.