

New Year's speech by the President of Leibniz University Hannover, Prof. Dr. iur. Volker Epping, 1 January 2023

Dear members of Leibniz University Hannover,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish you all a happy and – above all – healthy New Year. I hope that you enjoyed the Christmas holidays and the New Year's celebrations with family and friends.

2022 proved to be an extraordinary, eventful and very busy year. We continued university life at LUH in a professional and optimistic manner, in spite of difficulties. I would like to thank all university members for this, especially for acting flexibly and for your positive attitude towards changing circumstances.

Let me mention a few selected events in the past year before talking about some developments.

We all remember 24 February 2022, Russia's attack on Ukraine, which violated international law, as a black day. The continuing war is a catastrophe, not only for Europe, but for the whole world. Above all, we extend our solidarity to the Ukrainian people and our university partners. We also extend our sympathies to all critical minds in Russia condemning this war of aggression, despite being aware of the reprisals awaiting them in their own country.

Apart from causing unspeakable human suffering, the Russian invasion is also an attack on the core values freedom, democracy and self-determination, on which scientific freedom and scientific cooperation opportunities are based.

Following the attack, we have promptly abandoned all institutional activities with Russia.

Russia's war of aggression resulted in the energy crisis, which hit all of us hard, both in our private lives and as a university.

In recent years, LUH attracted a great deal of international attention and established itself as a university with a strong research and teaching capacity.

This success also drastically increased our energy costs, while basic funding remained the same. Despite all promises of support by the federal and state governments, we need to make a significant contribution in order to face this enormous increase in energy costs. So far, the relevant ministries have only advised us that we will have to use our insufficient basic funding to cover these costs, which – as previously mentioned – has not been adjusted for more than 15 years.

Ladies and gentlemen, this represents a negation of the significance of science for our society, for our country. Our society's future ultimately depends on science. We generate the required findings, the knowledge necessary to advance our society. We generate innovation, solutions to social challenges. Moreover, we are at the core of the education system because we train tomorrow's teachers. We also train all qualified young researchers that science, the economy and all other areas rely on.

I have worked very hard to ensure that the importance of our work for the future viability of our country is recognised. This recognition can be found in the current

coalition agreement. It says there in black and white that the basic funding of universities will be increased. But the new state government now needs to make good on this promise in a timely manner.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am very glad that the prevailing topic of the past two years, the COVID19 pandemic, has now faded into the background. We are in the process of determining an appropriate way for dealing with the virus in order to take charge of this new normality. In spite of that, I am proud that all university members worked together and enabled us to resume on-campus learning in winter semester 2021/2022. This was not a given. Very few universities chose this path and it was necessary and the right choice.

In retrospect, in addition to challenges in connection with various crises, excellent research achievements and innovations in teaching have once again positioned our university and our location perceptibly.

I am very proud of what our colleagues have achieved in all areas of our university. This is certainly not a given.

Let me highlight two outstanding research achievements:

Seven new ERC Grants for innovative research in one year; that is an impressive outcome. Our top researchers were exceptionally successful – across all disciplines, across all ERC categories and with a large proportion of excellent female researchers.

Another outstanding achievement is the award of the first Alexander von Humboldt Professorship at our university. We are delighted that we were successful in the competition for Germany's most prestigious research award. Our new colleague professor Raußendorf is an internationally renowned expert in theoretical physics who has published a number of spectacular contributions in the field of quantum computing and fundamental quantum theory. With this, we have once again demonstrated that our university has established itself as an institution with cutting-edge research in top-notch and innovative fields.

The transition to online teaching and learning due to the pandemic created a new basis for developing teaching and learning as well as for communicating related aspects. We will face this challenge to optimise teaching and learning. In this context, we also aim to reach a commitment on guiding principles and values in teaching and learning and incorporate them in a mission statement. Because it is our goal to further improve teaching and learning as a key aspect of our university. In this respect, we also focus on the necessary transformation of our degree programmes. We need to take into account the interests of future students and not only reflect our study programme, but also adapt it.

The European mindset guides the development of the European University Alliance EULiST. Our proposal as a "European University" was considered eligible by the European Union at the first attempt; but unfortunately it was not approved due to a lack of funds. This is an incentive for us to succeed in the next round of calls, which is already in progress. We still strive to cooperate with our EULiST partners in the context of studies, research and administration, also to ensure our future viability.

As an institution, we have taken a crucial step towards building a better future with respect to structure. I am delighted that in July 2022, a large majority of the Senate approved the proposal to submit a request to the state government for converting Leibniz University Hannover into a foundation under public law with legal capacity. This concludes a two-year information and discussion process at the university.

Many thanks for your commitment and expertise in shaping this process.

This decision paves the way for developing Leibniz University Hannover in a more sustainable and independent manner, both strategically and financially. Thank you for this vote of confidence. If the state government approves the request, we expect to convert Leibniz University Hannover into a foundation this spring.

We have carried out many activities that we will intensify next year, in preparation and in anticipation of the upcoming Excellence Strategy. It is particularly important to university management to support those intending to enter this competition in the best possible way.

With this in mind, the past months have been exceptionally dynamic, in particular due to the vision workshops. Many have used these intensive workshops to further develop central research questions and to consolidate their interdisciplinary teams, even beyond cluster initiatives.

I would like to use this opportunity to emphasize: The upcoming competition will not be easy, it will be challenging. But I am very optimistic because I see a profound level of enthusiasm, team spirit and willingness to deliver maximum performance in all areas. This is an excellent basis for making full use of our university's potential and for creating a cooperative working environment.

Finally, I would like to address a matter of great importance to me. Appreciating the achievements of all those involved in our internationally renowned scientific system.

The more resolutely we react to new challenges with the help of scientific findings, the less room there is for irrational interpretations. Scientific ignorance and rejecting scientific findings in combination with social prejudice can cause severe problems. Fake news are dangerous because they can quickly determine our actions resulting in destructive effects. Especially in times of crisis, it is important to identify fake news and separate them from facts to make informed decisions.

Sound and professional science communication is therefore essential for explaining, for convincing and for building trust. This is the responsibility of science. Consequently, this is also our responsibility since we represent science.

Ladies and gentlemen, in spite of many challenges, I look ahead with a sense of optimism and would like to thank all members of our university for your extraordinary commitment last year.

Once again, I wish all of you a happy 2023 filled with good health.

Let us look forward to interactions, to listening to each other, to reflecting, to discussing, to understanding and to creating new solutions.

Please remain optimistic and take care.