

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

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish you a happy New Year – above all – filled with good health. I am delighted that you have joined our virtual New Year's reception.

Unfortunately, this year's speech cannot be delivered in person and in front of you as an auditorium in the atrium of the main university building.

Once again, 2021 proved to be an extraordinary, eventful and very busy year for all of us. Our professional and private lives are still heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We quickly recognised the sign of the times since the start of the pandemic and have taken action. We have reduced the risk of infection in our area of responsibility in the long term while enabling students to continue and complete their studies successfully: After three online semesters, we have completely resumed on-campus learning in the winter semester, as one of very few universities in Germany.

Our extensive hygiene measures proved to be entirely successful. In a nutshell, I would like to emphasise that we implemented the principles "inform, test, vaccinate, reduce access and monitor 3G access" at our university from the start of the winter semester.

Universities are definitely not the primary cause for the current number of infections. Among other things, the high percentage of vaccinated students and staff has been a factor in this. Thus, we are able to maintain teaching and learning under compliance with the 3G rule. Because – just like schools – we are a central element of education, which is essential for our society. Therefore, it is only fair that we are not treated like any event or national league football match. We have worked and waited for this for a long time, to be able to study, teach and work on campus again. We missed personal exchange, face-to-face conversations and interacting on campus. We are now able to experience all of these things again, and appreciate them even more.

I know from numerous emails and personal conversations that many students and members of staff greatly appreciate this clear decision in favour of on-campus learning. But I also know that some students and members of staff are greatly concerned about this. They worry and would prefer returning to online learning. I myself, the entire Presidential Board, the faculties, the Senate and the emergency committee, who constantly work together, fully understand this. All of us take these concerns very seriously. On behalf of university management, I would therefore like to clearly reiterate, that we are closely monitoring events and will carefully and responsibly assess whether on-campus learning can no longer be implemented. Nevertheless, we have once again asked all teaching staff to continue using possibilities such as streaming, hybrid formats and recorded lectures from previous semesters in addition to on-campus learning.

I would also like to mention that researchers – even in the most critical phase of the pandemic – continued to teach and conduct research successfully. Members of technical and administrative staff have faced challenges in a highly innovative and flexible manner, providing necessary services in spite of difficulties. We can all be very proud of this outcome.

Let me look back on some success stories in research in the past year.

A major success in collaborative research includes CRC/Transregio "SIIRI: Safety Integrated and Infection Reactive Implants". Led by MHH and in cooperation with LUH researchers from engineering sciences and natural sciences, this project aims to develop innovative implant systems to be used in dentistry and orthopaedics, as well as hearing implants.

On the one hand, the approval of this CRC/Transregio demonstrates the efficiency of biomedical research in Hannover. On the other hand, this once again proves the success of collaborations between LUH and MHH.

Adequate infrastructure is an important prerequisite for conducting good research. For our key research area "Optical Technologies", following the recommendation of the German Council of Sciences and Humanities, the Joint Science Conference has approved 50 million € of funding for the OPTICUM research building.

The research building will be located at Wissenschaftspark Hannover-Marienwerder. About 120 researchers from physics, mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, mathematics, computer science and chemistry will work together under one roof in order to advance the digitalisation of optical research and optical production.

I am delighted that this future-oriented topic will now be manifested in a new research building; therefore being acknowledged and supported by scientific policy. OPTICUM additionally strengthens our Cluster of Excellence PhoenixD, as well as Leibniz University Hannover and Hannover as a location.

Last April, we were delighted to hear that a top researcher of our university acquired an ERC Advanced Grant. Professor Schmidt receives one of the most renowned research grants amounting to almost 2.5 million € of funding for a five-year project investigating key issues of modern fundamental physics in the field of quantum technology.

About a year ago, leading research facilities, businesses and the State of Lower Saxony joined the alliance Quantum Valley Lower Saxony (QVLS) in order to bring together the expertise of over 400 researchers in the involved institutions.

Initial quantum computer prototypes are already being tested in the Hannover/Braunschweig region and advancing at high speed. In cooperation with re-search and industry partners, the first quantum computer will be put into operation by 2025. Over the next 10 years, more than 1.5 billion € will be invested into this future technology. Due to start-up funding provided by the state government and Volkswagen Foundation, more than 100 million € of third-party funding were already acquired via Quantum Valley within the first year.

Ladies and gentlemen,

In light of these positive developments, we can look ahead with enthusiasm.

However, before taking a look at the future, I would like to take a moment to express my gratitude. I would like to thank all university members for their extraordinary effort in the past year. With outstanding commitment, you overcame the challenges brought about by the pandemic that we have now had to deal with for such a long time, alongside your regular daily duties. Thank you very much for your tireless effort. This makes me feel optimistic about what the New Year holds for us.

To be well prepared for the future, we regularly have to ask ourselves how we can establish LUH for increasing competition.

I aim to continue establishing LUH as one of Germany's universities with a strong research capacity while addressing major social challenges and incorporate them into our teaching activities. We need to fully tap into our potential in order to make the university an internationally appealing place of knowledge generation and knowledge transfer.

We aim to tackle relevant issues of our time through cooperation between the re-quired disciplines. In the tradition of our namesake Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, we summarise our actions in our new motto: "Global thinking, interdisciplinary research: the spirit of Leibniz!". The motto is closely connected to our overall strategy "LUH 2031", which was also adopted last year. It provides a glimpse into the future, up until 2031, when LUH will celebrate its 200th anniversary. It is a venerable anniversary – but also a goal that requires some hard work.

The overall strategy 2031 fixes key strategic development targets as well as fields of action and specific measures of our university that will guide our work over the next years. In the context of discussing the overall strategy, we also evaluated the possibility of transferring the university into a foundation under public law. This model is a great opportunity, as proven over the course of the 20-year history of higher education institutions in Lower Saxony that have already adopted the model. In particular, the past year repeatedly showed us the disadvantages compared to universities that have adopted the foundation model, not only with regard to financial aspects.

We have discussed the pros and cons on many occasions. All university members exchanged different experiences but also addressed concerns and doubts. Within the scope of meetings open to all university members, we have received support from experts who shared their experience with the foundation model. The climate of open and transparent communication at Leibniz University Hannover contributed to the fact that all LUH members interested in forming an opinion about this topic were able to do so.

I am delighted that the Senate decided to mandate the Presidential Board to open negotiations with the State of Lower Saxony in July 2021.

Once negotiations have been concluded, a discussion open to all groups and members of the university will be held. Following this, the Senate will decide whether the request for converting the university into a foundation under public law is granted.

Another important intermediate step in our overall strategy will be the next round of proposals in the Excellence Strategy of the federal and state governments. In the last round of proposals, LUH was very successful: In three out of its five key research areas, LUH acquired Clusters of Excellence. Moreover, LUH is significantly involved in a Cluster of Excellence of TU Braunschweig.

Securing a second funding period for the existing EXC is of great strategic importance. A positive outcome would not only secure the leading position in our key research areas, but also once again qualify us for the "Universities of Excellence" funding line. Being one of fifteen universities in Germany awarded the status of a University of Excellence is definitely worthwhile.

Calls for the next round of the Excellence Strategy are expected to be launched by the end of 2022. It is particularly important to university management to accompany and support both existing and new Clusters of Excellence. Because our researchers want to enter this competition.

An important measure to visualise excellent ideas were the vision workshops held in November 2021. For this purpose, researchers from all disciplines and career levels were invited to discuss innovative new approaches, to highlight topics as well as to enhance and further develop research programmes.

The interest to participate in and contribute to these workshops impressed me deeply. During my participation and in conversations with many colleagues, I learned that the need for exchanging ideas and interdisciplinary cooperation is very present. And not only that: The chosen workshop format greatly stimulated the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas.

I would be delighted if subsequent steps of cooperation would be taken with as much enthusiasm, interest and commitment. This is important, since I am convinced that we can only successfully position LUH for the future by working together.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The past year at LUH was defined by consolidating tried-and-trusted systems, by coping with completely unfamiliar challenges, by long-term developments, by experiencing highlights as well as a great deal of solidarity in difficult situations. There are certainly other things worth mentioning, but this is not possible due to time constraints.

To conclude my speech, I would like to emphasise that we regularly need to consider our values. Where many scientists teach and conduct research and people with many different opinions meet, there will always be discourse and conflict. I support an open and varied discourse at our university that needs to endure anything based on the free democratic basic order.

Furthermore, I consider it of great importance that we reflect our debate and communication culture. Irrespective of the corona crisis, we experience a tendency of polarisation within our society. We must return to common ground, to common core values. Based on this, we must develop arguments, discuss necessary measures and make a decision. Not everything must constantly be commented on by everyone. Dynamic communication in social media encourages this development and provides backing for interest groups sharing very strange views. Waves of outrage spread quickly, dividing societies. Communicating with each other and reaching a consensus on decisions pointing the way ahead increasingly becomes more difficult.

Let's set a benchmark in these troubled times, for a democratic debate and communication culture. Let's talk to each other, not about one another without consideration. Let me quote our namesake Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: "People are different, but truth is one, and all those searching for it, irrespective of the field, help each other."

Despite or especially in light of the difficult situation, I wish all of you a happy 2022 filled with good health.

Please remain optimistic and take care.

Thank you for your attention.