

New Year's Address

by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft,
Professor Peter Strohschneider,
on 13 January 2014 in Berlin

- Check Against Delivery -



Ministers and Senators,
State Secretaries,
Honorable Members of the German Bundestag,
Excellencies and esteemed members of the diplomatic Corps,
Presidents and Chancellors,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour for the DFG and my personal pleasure to welcome you all to our New Year's reception this evening.

I hope you had a merry Christmas and a joyful start to the New Year. May this joy carry you through the next twelve months and enrich your life, both personally and professionally. And if our reception here in Berlin can do its part to engender a cheerful confidence, it certainly wouldn't be a bad start.

As last year, let me also extend a very warm welcome to all our guests from abroad. I hope that you had a joyful holiday season and I wish you all the best for the coming year. It is a pleasure for us to have you here tonight – so let us continue our conversation about academic research. There's much to talk about; and at the DFG, we are always interested in learning from others.

Ladies and gentlemen, we are at the beginning of a new legislative period of the German Bundestag. The coalition agreement between the CDU, CSU and SPD is in place, and so is Chancellor Merkel's new cabinet. And like its predecessors, the current federal government has given a weighty position to education, science and research within the overall structure of competing policy domains.

This is good and right and important. Our individual and our collective being in society, economy and culture depends enormously on the performance and quality of the science and research system. The new government's political attention to this field of action also opens up the space in which it and the states can dialogue with academic and scientific institutions to negotiate and enhance the policy guidelines and the details of organisation and financing that shape German science and research in its many international involvements.

And by the way, we shouldn't take for granted that such political and social significance is attached to science and research. We only need to take a comparative look at the research budgets of other countries in the European Union. We might also recall ancient knowledge of how society usually deals with science, regardless of changing partisan preferences. The uproarious laughter of the Thracian handmaid of whom Plato tells in *Theaetetus* (174a) has become emblematic of this. She laughed at the astronomer Thales of Miletus, who had fallen into a well because, engrossed as he was in stargazing, he had lost sight of the ground before his feet. The criterion for science here is merely the degree of its direct usefulness for practical living – and, true enough, it doesn't always look so good from this aspect.

And as in Miletus and the world of the ancient Greeks, so today in ubiquitous Springfield and the world of Homer Simpson and his family (in the eponymous animated series). At the Springfield Heights Institute of Technology, Professor Frink develops projects which to imitate would be as ill-advised as – the handmaid would say – Thales's astronomy. And this is just one strand in the rather complex and quite witty science discourse on *The Simpsons*. In one of the all-time best episodes (6/14: *Bart's Comet*), Homer's son Bart Simpson sabotages a weather balloon, which is supposed to excite students' interest in research as part of a science week. As punishment, Bart must assist his teacher, Principal Skinner, in amateur astronomy at dawn. His task is to write down the coordinates of regions in the sky that appear to be empty when observed through Skinner's telescope. It's a case of blue skies research. It follows the dynamics of curiosity, and even finding nothing is a result worth recording.

However, when Bart Simpson himself takes a look through the telescope, he discovers a giant comet – which, as the state observatory soon confirms, is hurtling straight toward Springfield. Looking at this example, on the one hand, there are problems that wouldn't even exist without scientific curiosity, and on the other hand, even research that initially follows mere curiosity can suddenly produce knowledge that is clearly of utmost importance. Knowing now that Springfield is about to be destroyed by a comet, and therefore being confronted with their date of death, the people of Springfield wonder with panicked urgency how to prepare for it.

The Simpsons episode now segues into a bitter satire on the public disaster-discourse. Unsurprisingly, the disaster ultimately fails to occur; after all, this is not the final episode of The Simpsons. As people resign to their demise, the comet burns up in the polluted atmosphere over Springfield; only a small chunk of it causes damage by shattering, of all places, the city's sole shelter. However, this is by no means the end of the discourse on the tension between society and science. So the observatory's disaster forecast was wrong. Bartender Moe, owner of Moe's Tavern and exemplar of the average person's knowledge, therefore draws the conclusion: "Let's go burn down the observatory so this'll never happen again!"

In other words, get rid of science and its institutions. But why? Is the destruction of the observatory, in a fit of magical thinking, meant to prevent future hits by comets? Or are astronomers, out of atavistic vengeance, supposed to be blamed for the comet hazard? Or is society's expectation that science be useful taken to its absurd extreme here? After all, the astronomical knowledge turned out to be useless – the comet burned up in time – not to say harmful, because in hindsight, the Springfielders worried for nothing. Common sense doesn't have its head in the stars but rather buries it in the sand: "Let's go burn down the observatory so this'll never happen again!"

The political understanding that underlies the coalition agreement of Chancellor Merkel's third cabinet differs clearly from this attitude. It sees science and research as an especially important force in society, prioritises it, and addresses in particular the development and promotion of universities and research organisations. This approach is based on a broad consensus on research policy that transcends partisan differences over details. It indicates that Germany's unique social stability and economic strength are not least related to the fact that we have a very strong research system which is organisationally differentiated according to the different scientific functions.

This stable consensus on research policy in Germany includes the understanding that high-performing research – especially when it comes to meeting the special challenges of a highly modern knowledge society – also requires freedom: areas of autonomy for scientific enquiry and questioning, of curiosity and passion for knowledge. Comets are discovered not by examining comets, but by looking at the cosmos. In other words, society is – quite rightly – interested in the answers that science can give. But from the perspective of science, the reverse is equally true. As neurobiologist Stuart Firestein of Columbia University recently put it, for science itself, “Questions are more relevant than answers. Questions are bigger than answers.”¹ That’s why the German research system also provides suitable institutional and financial support for curiosity-driven enquiry, complementing the programme-oriented approach. This is where basic research at universities and non-university institutions comes in – along with much of what the DFG does with its focus on funding and nurturing excellent curiosity-driven research.

The general political prioritisation of science and research and a broad consensus on the basic principles of research policy provide a solid framework within which our science system can be developed from good to better. And the coalition agreement of the new federal government sets out the right steps to make this happen. Different from the Thracian handmaid and bartender Moe, it takes research and its institutions seriously. This can be seen in, among other indicators, the announcement that the three major pacts of cooperative research funding by the federal government and the states will be continued. Incidentally, the federal government alone will finance the budget increase under the Pact for Research and Innovation.

At least as important for research and academia as a whole is the government’s intention to provide universities with more money for core funding under the federal budget. Even if its financial and legal framework has yet to be defined, this policy commitment addresses what is – it must be said – the biggest problem of Germany’s universities: a structural lack of adequate basic funding for education and research. The DFG has repeatedly drawn attention to this problem, which also affects the DFG itself – in the form of an ever-growing flood of proposals and a drastic change in the role of external funding. Only if federal participation in providing basic funding for universities becomes a legal and financial reality as soon as possible can we establish a better balance between core and third-party funding for academic research.

¹ Stuart Firestein. *Ignorance: How It Drives Science*. Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 11.

This problem, by the way, affects universities and universities of applied sciences alike. Appropriations for research at universities of applied sciences must be significantly increased. Competitively raised funding can supplement core support in this area, but it cannot replace it. While researchers at universities of applied sciences have always been eligible for DFG funding, the organisation plans to adjust its consultation, review and decision processes to serve their needs even better. And it will do so in keeping with its mission, that is: based on proposals, neutral toward the applicants' institutional affiliation, and guided by scientific quality assessments.

The latter would seem to be a given, and yet there is cause to reemphasise it. Research can be differentiated not just quantitatively, or functionally, or based on how directly or indirectly it meets society's criteria of relevance; it can also be differentiated qualitatively. There is first-rate research – at both universities and universities of applied sciences – and promoting it is the mission of the DFG. However, there is necessarily also second- and third-rate research. It must be funded through other channels. And in a way, one might say that all the DFG does is to differentiate between first-rate research and less excellent research, argumentatively and financially. This defines its very role within the organisational structure of science and academia in Germany.

Incidentally, this mission to differentiate, to select the best people and projects, also places the highest demands on the quality of the decision processes within the DFG itself. This is on our mind every day in our work in Bonn. Our job is to ensure this quality in an environment where reviewing capacity is increasingly becoming a scarce resource. And yet, by and large, the DFG succeeds in this endeavour to such an extent that it may be appropriate even for its president to say: The programmes and procedures of the DFG are considered standard-setting on a worldwide basis. The Global Research Council Summit demonstrated this in a rather impressive way half a year ago in this very room.

And not because increasing the DFG budget is an end in itself, but precisely because of the soundness of its science-driven decision making, based entirely on outstanding research quality, I believe I can say: The DFG's funding portfolio provides the framework for the further development of the first and second lines of the Excellence Initiative. And I say this even though and because it entails considerable challenges for the DFG itself. The framework will hardly remain unaffected by the integration and further development of large-scale clusters of excellence. The DFG funding portfolio will therefore need to be reviewed and possibly adjusted.

Of course, critical self-observation is a standard task of any good organisation. But when it comes to the DFG's funding schemes and formats, it will be a special focus of our work in this new year. Do we have all the instruments we need to optimally promote the productivity and performance of top-level research? And are these instruments carefully aligned with each other? Do growing competitive pressure and the changing role of third-party funding necessitate adjustments (seeing as the rejection of grants, rather than their approval, has long become the norm)? How can we make room for responding to the needs of researchers as well as politicians and society at large? Are we open enough to accommodate the diversity of research formats and knowledge interests? And what about original or higher-risk research?

I hope that a year from now, possible answers to such questions will have emerged. It's going to be a year of intense discussions, for the DFG as well as for research and research policy in Germany overall. On the principles, which I mentioned earlier, there is widespread agreement. To concretise them into legal, organisational and financial arrangements remains our shared task. And the DFG will actively participate in it – as the self-governing organisation of research in Germany, whose mission it is to promote excellent curiosity-driven research in all branches of science and the humanities.

After all, the social value of science crucially depends on such research. It would be cheap and wrong to laugh with the Thracian handmaid at the alleged otherworldliness of astronomers. Let's not burn down the observatories (nor the libraries, laboratories, auditoriums and classrooms) – instead, let us support and expand them. Because Bart Simpson's teacher, Principal Skinner, is right: "There's nothing more exciting than science!"

May you experience this intensely over the coming months. Have a successful, productive and, above all, a happy new year!