

New Year's Adress

of the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft,
Professor Dr. Peter Strohschneider,
on 13. January 2015 in Berlin

- Check Against Delivery -

Ladies and gentlemen,

Let me begin with a quote: “We hold knowledge in high esteem, and rightly so. But though a man’s life may be completely filled by research into the functioning of the kidneys, there will be moments, humanistic moments, so to speak, when he may ponder the relationship between the kidneys and his country. This is why Goethe is so widely quoted in Germany.”¹ But why is that? What problem do Goethe quotes promise to solve? Well, obviously the tension between the devoted study of the kidney and the “country” at large, i.e. the tension that exists between nephrological specialisation and general society. And the reference to the Olympian of Weimar (who is also a popular topos in New Year’s addresses) seems to be able to make this tension bearable. Classical is that which reconciles the contradictions of modernity.

That is what Robert Musil, whom I have quoted here, says in his novel *The Man Without Qualities*, an epochal text of literary modernism, which can be read, inter alia, as a novel about modern science. And which, of course, caricatures the humanist hope of reconciliation. The relationship between nephrology and the country; the tension between scientific specialisation and overarching functions of science; between, on the one hand, the intrinsic dynamics of the individual search for knowledge by which “a man’s life may be completely filled”, and on the other hand, the social importance of research — this tension cannot be

¹ Quote in: Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, New York 1995, p. 204.

resolved in knowledge societies. Rather, it is downright constitutive of modern research. And it can therefore not really be defused by classical quotes (which is why I promise not to mention Goethe anymore from here on out). On the contrary: the productivity and significance of modern research actually depend on this balance of tension between the wilfulness of scientific curiosity and society's legitimate expectations of functionality. This is encapsulated in catchphrases such as "autonomy" and "utility" of research. But they suggest falsely that these are opposites — as if the utility of research were to diminish as its autonomy grows. In fact, the two are positively correlated: Freedom for the intrinsic dynamics of scientific knowledge processes is essential to the ability of research to provide new answers to social questions. Balancing this interdependent relationship institutionally and financially is therefore, it seems to me, the fundamental systemic issue in research policy and management.

Festive occasions, distinguished guests, create space for discussing these and similar questions in a way that is free of the day-to-day pressures of political and administrative decision-making. It is therefore an honour for the DFG and a pleasure not only for its Executive Board that you have accepted the invitation to our New Year's reception —

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

I hope you had a dynamic and relaxed start into the new year, with a hopeful outlook extending beyond the present day. And I would like it if our New Year's reception could provide a pleasant setting for exchanging such outlooks and exploring them in conversation. As every year, let me also extend a very warm welcome at this point to all our guests from abroad. It is a pleasure for us to have you here tonight, and I wish you all the best for the coming year. For the DFG, your presence here has a special significance: It reflects the truly international nature of academic research, and it encourages us to carry on with promoting international cooperation. So let us use this evening to exchange new ideas, but let us also celebrate what we have achieved in the last years.

Ladies and gentlemen,

“The relationship between the kidneys and his country” is anything but trivial. Highly complex, rather, are the entanglements between the internal dynamics of an extremely differentiated research system on the one hand, and its diverse direct and indirect external relationships with all levels of society on the other hand — with business, politics, judiciary and military, with the healthcare and education systems, with religion, culture and the arts. And the appropriateness and quality of research policy and administration depend crucially on successfully avoiding to unravel these entanglements in favour of one side or the other; in other words, on the ability to honour these entanglements in their complexity in day-to-day policymaking and administration.

Only at the cost of their future viability — this is my firm belief — could modern knowledge societies do without this very specific achievement of modernity: the freedom of academic research from the constraints of immediate non-scientific purposes, for the sake of its freedom to fulfil a variety of other social functions — including those which society could not have anticipated. In this sense, academic freedom is much more than merely a constitutional privilege. It is a functional necessity without which socially significant modern research, even of moderate ambition, could not exist. And I stress this because even though freedom of research, at least in our society, is uncontroversial as a principle, its practical application must be fought for again and again. And because there is reason to worry that even as research is becoming societally ever more important, the understanding of the corresponding necessity of its freedom is dwindling.

Robert Musil’s question about the relationship between nephrology and “country” — which he follows up with the satirical remark that it can be answered by quoting Goethe — this question about the interdependence of research autonomy and research utility is not merely of systemic importance. It is also very timely. And it connects all the way to the level of legal authority, funding structures and financial possibilities in our federal research system.

The decisions of the Gemeinsame Wissenschaftskonferenz on 30 October of last year and then of the heads of government just before Christmas belong in this context. Although they have not yet combined the major federal–state pacts into a framework agreement on federal research funding — which will probably be necessary in the medium term — the fundamental decision regarding the further development of the Excellence Initiative as an instrument with a special focus on promoting top-level university research through competition, and regarding the continuation of the Pact for Research and Innovation and the Higher Education

Pact (including an increased programme allowance for indirect project costs for DFG grants) is a remarkable research-policy success. Germany's research funding and research performing organizations have welcomed it with great relief. If we also take into account that the federal government henceforth will be the sole funder of public student loans and grants as well as of the budget increases under the Pact for Research and Innovation, and that the Basic Law has been amended to permit federal–state cooperation on higher education, we can see the extent to which Germany's framework for research and education has been improved.

“We hold knowledge in high esteem, and rightly so.” Policymakers, as we can see, place institutional trust in it. The organisations and institutions, on the whole, have the kind of planning outlook they need in order to keep enhancing the quality and performance of research and higher education, even in an international context that is becoming ever more diverse and polycentric.

As we implement these improved policies, it is all the more important then that we also tackle with vigour and urgency the problem areas that still weaken German research. And that we do so in a way — I repeat — that does not curtail, in favour of short-term benefits, those effects of academic research and higher education that unfold only over longer time horizons, often rather indirectly, and for whose sake our constitution guarantees the freedom of research. From the perspective of the DFG, the most pressing of these problem areas are early-career academics and the universities without which there can be no early-career academics.

The performance of research and higher education depends to a large extent on scientists and scholars at the beginning of their career — those who are commonly referred to here as “Nachwuchs,” a German term that may not always bring positive connotations. Without their efforts, by the way, the transformational dynamics that have shaped and enhanced the research system over the last ten years — keyword: Excellence Initiative — would be entirely inconceivable.

However, it should give us all pause that in the same decade in which research has enjoyed an unprecedented degree of political attention and additional funding, the situation of young doctoral and postdoctoral researchers has by no means improved but, on the whole, actually got worse. The catchphrase of the “precarisation of mid-level faculty” is shrill, but not entirely wrong. However, it focuses on the socio-political dimension of the problem. The other side of it is that this represents the foremost challenge to the academic research system — that of the self-preservation of its ability to perform and thus remain viable into the future. For if working conditions and contractual relations in the public sector are becoming less and less competitive with those in the private sector, this will damage said ability to perform. This will make it increasingly difficult to attract the most intelligent, the most daring, the most original young researchers to publicly funded research.

There is actually consensus on what should be done about it. We need more third ways between advancement to professorship and complete withdrawal from the academic system — in other words, a more predictable outlook for academic research as a profession, differentiated personnel structures, permanent positions for permanent tasks, as well as more professorships. All of this, incidentally, cannot be replaced by labour regulations. And it is also not within the responsibility of the funding agencies. But the DFG does propose a supportive intervention using project grants, by developing the first funding line of the Excellence Initiative into an “early career package”. This “early career package” would combine an expansion of structured early-career support with a strengthening of the research focus in Research Training Groups (after all, a doctorate is not a third study cycle, but the beginning of academic research as a career) and with enhanced funding opportunities for postdoctoral researchers. Such an “early career package” cannot substitute the necessary structural improvements for young researchers, which are primarily the responsibility of the states, but it could facilitate and accelerate the reform process and thus mitigate the urgency of this crucial challenge to the future of the research system.

As a second problem area requiring special attention in the further development of the research system, I mentioned earlier the universities. What I meant in particular is the structural position of the universities within the research system. This position has been strengthened by the Excellence Initiative in an impressive way. In fact, the universities’ critical self-observation and strategic capabilities have reached a new level — to a certain extent even independently of the actual financial support. With the clusters of excellence, fascinating agglomerations of top-level research have been created, which are also hubs of

intensified collaboration across institutional boundaries — not only with non-university academic research, but also with universities of applied sciences, museums and academies, and private-sector research.

These processes of scientific prioritisation, of creating regional agglomerations of research are far from complete (and they could be complete only at the cost of the openness and dynamism of research). Rather, they continue, and they will be able to be the more successful the more the right balance is found between expectations of immediate functionality, set by society, policymakers and the private sector in the area of programme-based research, and those social functions of research that require leeway for intrinsic scientific curiosity to unfold.

The DFG has therefore come up with a plan to make this possible by further developing the functions of the second funding line under the Excellence Initiative. It proposes a funding opportunity for actions through which a university sets itself up to become the gravitational centre of a local or regional research area with international visibility. For this purpose, the ability of universities to take initiative and cooperate must be structurally and financially further improved; this might require longer funding periods than are currently common for project grants; and that calls not least for overcoming the somewhat artificial separation of research and research-related teaching, which the Excellence Initiative was forced to make until recently for constitutional reasons.

We are talking about a funding instrument — let us call it “centres of excellence” for now — that aligns with the established thrust of the Excellence Initiative. After all, it has not been about funding all manners of research, but from the beginning, and — in terms of enhancing the performance of the entire research system — successfully beyond all expectation, about promoting specifically top-level university research; otherwise there would be no reason for the research-driven procedures of the Excellence Initiative.

Perhaps you will forgive me if I add: The new federal–state initiative, understood in this way, still requires rules of competition that meet the highest scientific procedural standards. And in the German research system, the DFG is the obvious venue for this, because it combines, like no other entity, the scientific dignity of funding decisions with their political legitimacy. Without the confidence of policymakers at the federal and state levels, and without the acceptance of researchers and university managers, any kind of further development of the Excellence Initiative would be doomed from the outset.

But we should indeed develop it further. And that will entail various adjustments of funding instruments and procedures. But in the process we should not abandon or weaken the key objective of the Excellence Initiative: promoting insight-driven, top-level research at universities. The competition's amazing effectiveness is not least due to this well-established and well-defined goal. And one aspect of this effectiveness is that the Excellence Initiative has been instrumental in balancing extrinsic demands on research and intrinsic dynamics of scientific knowledge processes in the interest of a societally powerful research system. For as long as the tension between specialised kidney research and the social whole, of which Robert Musil spoke ironically, is institutionally balanced, as long will we not need to wrap it into humanistic quotes from the classics.

I wish you stimulating discussions, a productive, successful and happy New Year, and thank you for your attention.