

What Research Needs Now

Speech by the President of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft
(DFG, German Research Foundation)

Professor Dr. Katja Becker

at the DFG's New Year's Reception

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Check against delivery!

Ladies and Gentlemen, Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

With this lively opening, I would like to welcome you to the New Year's Reception of the German Research Foundation. I hope you have spent a wonderful festive season with family and friends, and I am delighted to have the honour of celebrating the New Year with you.

My sincere thanks go to the Berliner Äcademy für Marching Drums (BÄM!) for such an energising and memorable start to today's event. With snap elections drawing near, the musicians' seemingly effortless, joyous and meticulously coordinated performance impressively illustrates how much can be achieved through coordinated effort – whether in music, research or politics.

Over the holiday period I recalled a poem by Bertolt Brecht that I believe captures our current situation quite aptly – even though it was written in a completely different context. It reads as follows:

Changing the wheel

I am sitting by the side of the road.

The driver is changing the wheel.

I don't like where I was.

I don't like where I am going to.

Why do I watch the changing of the wheel
with impatience?

Well, many of us would certainly say that we did not entirely dislike where we were before, and we can probably expect the same to be true of where we will be in the future. Yet the challenges we have faced in recent years have been immense, causing us to lose some of our sense of ease. And looking ahead, the future holds much uncertainty.

So why are we, too, so impatient as we watch the changing of the wheel – the transition from one year to the next, the changes in politics, the shift in the global balance of power? It might be the sense of having to pause involuntarily that gives rise to this sense of impatience. But wherever it comes from, it is certainly a productive restlessness, a sign of vitality, a creative urge that is deeply inherent in us human beings – and that's good news.

Amid all the changes that are going on, this urgent desire to drive progress is something we're witnessing throughout research, politics and society at large. Our country *has* both the capabilities and the resources to rise to the challenge and drive forward the development of Germany as a centre of research in the next legislative period.

There is much to tackle. We want to achieve closer-knit collaboration not just within the research system itself but also with the federal and state governments. An interdisciplinary advisory body, broadly endorsed by the research community, could serve as a key element here. The Academies of Sciences and Humanities and the Alliance of Science Organisations are eager to contribute jointly to this effort. We want to tap into synergies and jointly advance one of the best research systems in the world. We must now take the necessary steps to shape the future of research – and with it the innovative capacity and future viability of our country.

In the next few minutes, I'd like to talk about what I think research needs now.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, broad sections of our society came to realise just what an enormous contribution research is able to make. We must continue to actively communicate this, in a range of different contexts, and not allow the population at large to fall prey to disinformation and conspiracy theories.

For this reason, we took to the market squares of six German cities last year to talk to citizens about research under the motto "Research – and me?!". This project involved numerous dedicated researchers – including Christoph Marksches of the BBAW, in whose wonderful Leibniz Hall we are honoured to be guests this evening, Walter Rosenthal of the German Rectors' Conference and Robert Schlögl of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. In the course of these discussions it became clear to them and to all of us just how great people's interest in science and research is, and we saw the warmth and appreciation that is shown to us as

representatives of the research community on such occasions, when we communicate on an equal footing.

These are no more than fleeting glimpses, of course. Yet they have certainly shown me that it is possible to bridge the gaps in our society through personal dialogue – even when it comes to controversial topics such as climate change and vaccination.

This is where the research community is called upon: it is up to us to listen, explain and build bridges. In this spirit, the DFG is also actively involved in numerous other initiatives to support our democratic and open society – a society in which ideologies and acts of hatred of any kind, particularly antisemitism, have no place whatsoever.

As our shared values of freedom, democracy and the rule of law now face growing challenges, we need the unifying strength of research more than ever. For a long time, this insight led us to actively engage on the platform X, formerly Twitter. Given the recent developments that you will all be aware of, however, the DFG has decided to suspend its activities on X in the near future. In doing so, we are sending a powerful message against the spreading of fake news, against the political instrumentalisation of social media and research, and against attacks on our democracy and the core values the DFG, among others, represents and has long stood for.

After all, there is one thing we must never forget here: in order for research to fulfil its many responsibilities, it must be free. It requires curiosity, determination and perseverance. But without our constitutionally enshrined freedom of research, it would lack the necessary freedom of thought, inspiration and openness to conduct independent research in new and unconventional ways.

For the DFG, as you all know, this means funding knowledge-driven research of the highest quality precisely where the impetus and the relevance of the quest for knowledge – the topic and research question – derive from the intrinsic interest of the researchers themselves. The force unleashed by this inherent motivation is enormous.

Incidentally, this pursuit of knowledge driven by tireless scientific curiosity and genuine enthusiasm for research can only be partially delegated to artificial intelligence. AI may be able to massively speed up and support many research processes and revolutionise research as we know it, but in the medium term, research cannot be reduced to extracting or extrapolating new discoveries or research questions from existing data and texts: it will be one of our main tasks in the coming years to counteract the kind of potentially homogenising tendencies that we are already seeing in other areas of society.

Our aim must be to venture further into unknown dimensions of knowledge and to think the previously unthought. In order to be able to do this, the research community needs centres where intellectual diversity is embraced in practice. Universities are such centres: through research and teaching, they give the most talented minds the space they require to follow their intrinsic curiosity, share ideas, and unleash the immense driving force of top-level, knowledge-driven research.

It is universities that lay the strategic foundations here, launching collaborative initiatives that often include non-university partners as well – such as Max Planck, Leibniz, Helmholtz and the Fraunhofer Institutes. We must continue to ensure that universities remain open for the pursuit of intellectual curiosity and interaction in the future, too – places where we engage in meaningful conversations and constructively discuss even the most diverse perspectives in the spirit of enquiry.

Through their Excellence Strategy, the federal and state governments are taking very deliberate and carefully planned steps to boost top-level university research. This flagship of German research funding combines the prestige of a science-led selection of excellence with a long-term funding perspective. Having already set considerable innovations in motion, the Excellence Strategy is impacting positively on universities' profile development and strategy processes as well as on cooperation with non-university research institutions. It also contributes to the urgently needed strengthening of research infrastructure.

It also offers enormous international prestige, creating highly appealing research hubs that attract outstanding minds from all over the world. It is not for nothing that the Excellence Strategy continues to be a model for comparable programmes in numerous countries. This is why – together with Wolfgang Wick of the German Science and Humanities Council – I consider it to be an outstanding source of inspiration for the further advancement of the European Research Area.

In order for the German research system to remain efficient and competitive, however, it also needs stability and planning security – not just to enable long-term research projects and academic careers. The federal and state governments currently offer this stability through the Pact for Research and Innovation.

This commitment on the part of the funding bodies is by no means something we should take for granted, especially in the current climate, and it is held in the very highest esteem by the research community. It is also an expression of a deeply rooted appreciation of the value of science and research in our country. What is more, it serves as a major competitive advantage for Germany's close-knit research system – particularly in these volatile times.

As the still nascent year gets underway, this trusting collaboration is something we should not just maintain but pursue with even greater intensity. In dialogue with each other we can unlock collective potential, not only reducing bureaucratic hurdles but in some cases eliminating them entirely, thereby creating the best possible conditions for Germany as a centre of research.

And if we wish to ensure continued excellence, creating a research-friendly environment is crucial. Some aspects here include establishing legal clarity for researchers and eliminating unnecessary bureaucratic barriers, especially in such areas as animal protection, genetic engineering facilities and new breeding techniques.

With regard to the digital turn in science and the humanities, an efficient AI infrastructure is also needed and research data must be managed in a more sustainable way. The National Research Data Infrastructure and its integration in the European Open Science Cloud offer excellent opportunities for facilitating access to data as well as for data interlinking and reuse. For this reason, it will be vital to consolidate and advance the structures established through the NFDI. What is more, research data legislation is urgently needed to enable researchers to incorporate data from government departments and authorities into their analyses.

The long-awaited increase and continuation of the programme allowance for indirect project costs is another effective source of leverage. Only in this way can projects continue to be adequately implemented at institutions in the future and perform well internationally.

Rounding off the picture as a whole, it is important to mention cooperative research networks and reliable prospects for flexible career paths both in Germany and throughout the EU. Here, commitment and responsibility are required on the part of everyone involved – within Germany and hand in hand with our European partners.

After all, an efficient European Research Area has immense scientific, economic and social potential. Yet the proposals being put forward by the new EU Commission for the next multi-annual financial framework could result in a complete reorganisation of this research area.

For this reason, together with our partner organisations in the Alliance and in Science Europe, the DFG is working to ensure that research is not lumped together with other policy areas under a single budget category for promoting competitiveness. Instead, research must be bolstered by an adequate, differentiated and dedicated budget.

It is now vital for policymakers and researchers in our country to actively engage in shaping these processes at the European level. Now is also the time for Europe to send out a powerful signal in favour of research that is independent – truly free – and has also global appeal.

Whether on the committees of the Global Research Councils, at the STS Forum in Japan, at the annual meeting of the Science Granting Councils Initiative in Botswana, or in close personal dialogue with our esteemed partners in Ukraine and Israel – one thing has always emerged clearly from my discussions with cooperation partners all over the world: this signal in favour of the independence of research is more important than ever. After all, research stands as the voice of reason in many contexts, and in the current geopolitical climate, research security is gaining in importance alongside freedom of research.

On a recent trip to Washington D.C., I talked to representatives of the German and US research community, policymakers and diplomats about how research security can be strengthened in practice without obstructing – let alone preventing – research itself.

From the DFG's perspective, responsible de-risking is the method of choice when it comes to striking a balance between freedom of research and security interests, and this minimisation of risk can only come from the well-established, decentralised structures and processes of academic self-governance.

It's good to know that we already have a large number of science-led structures in Germany whose experience we can draw on: take for instance the Joint Committee on the Handling of Security-Relevant Research established ten years ago by the DFG and Leopoldina, as well as the more than 150 committees for the ethics of security-relevant research that have been set up throughout Germany. Based on this kind of support structure, I believe that the final decision on international cooperation can and must be made by the respective researchers themselves and their institutions: after all, they are the experts in their fields.

Responsible, science-led risk minimisation in international research collaborations relies on the continued trust of both policymakers and society. Moreover, trust in our partners is vital to scientific collaboration and central to our human values and indeed to the society we live in. We must not let this mutual trust be easily undermined.

If we align with our international partners on common guidelines rooted in the principle of accountable transparency, maintain trust in our cooperation partners while continuing to take on responsibility ourselves, and make use of science diplomacy to build bridges and create opportunities, the benefits of international collaboration will far outweigh the risks to research and society – even in a fast-changing world.

These are some of the things that research needs right now from our perspective. Even though the DFG will likely address these issues in one form or another, I myself and indeed all of us look forward to discussing them with you this evening.

Thank you for your attention!