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Leuphana as a place of freedom and encouragement. A retrospective outlook.

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The university as a place "where nothing is out of question" (Derrida) is a place of freedom – a place where people educate themselves individually in the sense of their personal development; a place where impulses for social developments arise; and a place where knowledge can be gained in the matter itself.

Today we are living in a time when we are once again experiencing the importance of a university as a place of freedom – more important, perhaps, than it has been for a long time. At a time when clear expectations are placed on students from the outside as to what competencies and skills they must develop for their professional lives, it is all the more important to be able to follow one's personal path freely and confidently and to be able to develop personally on the basis of one's own interests, inclinations and abilities. At a time when the challenges facing society are greater than they have been for a long time, it is all the more important that the university sees itself as a place for reflecting on social developments and is able to contribute actively to solving social challenges and developing a free society. And at a time when options for action often seem "without alternative," i.e., compelling, it becomes all the more important to cultivate the culture of the university as a place that encourages its members to pursue insights into the matter at hand without preconditions, in search of truth and in responsibility for themselves and for others.

The question is what organizational conditions the university needs as a place of freedom for research and teaching conceived in this way. In principle, these organizational conditions can only be minimum organizational conditions if they want to enable freedom. At the same time, however, organizational conditions are needed that are capable of creating responsibility and dialogue, because freedom does not come about through arbitrariness, but requires mutual commitment.

Even during my own studies, I experienced what it is like when a university trusts students with something, namely freedom and courage - namely the courage to go their own way, to bring different perspectives into conversation with one another, the courage to endure conversations and, instead of looking for ready-made answers, above all to ask questions. The fact that Leuphana University of Lüneburg has also committed itself in its development, with great effort on the part of everyone

involved, to enabling precisely such experiences, was and continues to be a central motivation for me to work at Leuphana.

Leuphana's study model includes various formats that are particularly aimed at encouraging students to ask their own questions: First, there is the Leuphana Semester as a special specific of Leuphana. The Leuphana Semester gives students the opportunity to ask big questions at the beginning of their studies rather than at the end. The idea here is that not only students of one subject spend a first semester a little differently - but all first-year students of all subjects together. Opening Week and Conference Week mark the beginning and end of the Leuphana Semester, which is designed to open up, but also to provide orientation. This orientation is not only subject-specific, although subject-specific introductions are quite essential, also to facilitate orientation and study choices. In addition, the Leuphana Semester generally sensitizes students to the central elements of an academic approach. Getting to know methods as the language of science in their breadth and development and combining them with an understanding of scientific theory is central here. At the same time, however, science is always understood as science in society. It is therefore a matter of asking: How do people actually live together? How do they communicate and understand each other? How do they create and preserve their livelihoods? Inherently, students can thus address big questions about the relationship to our social as well as material environments, and study the scientific methods necessary to investigate them.

The Opening Week is a second important element. The Opening Week is about the joint development of a topic, a major social challenge and an initial scientific elaboration - and quite deliberately already at the very beginning of the studies. The Opening Week thus poses major questions about the future of social coexistence in an exemplary manner for the university as a whole and makes it clear that scientific work and scientific freedom can be conceived together with the responsibility of science for society. For students, it also means that the at least potentially discouraging moment of "I-am-small-and-know-nothing" of being a freshman is countered. Rather, first-year students naturally know a great deal as well. To be able to try out and develop their previous knowledge and their previous personal experiences and impressions on a topic and thus to make a contribution at the same time is a very important moment - and this is what the start week lives.

The Conference Week is very similar: In this format, 1,500 first-semester students contest a first scientific conference of their own, partly organizing it, partly shaping its content, contributing to it, and - of course - participating.

And last but not least, the Complementary Studies are about learning about perspectives of very different kinds - and not of an arbitrary kind, but with the goal of being able to better understand the language and issues of one's own subject through the language of other subjects.

These exemplary formats of the study model - the Leuphana Semester with Opening Week and Conference Week, the Complementary Studies - are embedded in an organizational model at Leuphana that relies not only on the classical faculties, but also on schools. From my perspective, the schools are essentially about focusing on study phases - and thus an organizational form that focuses on the specific development of a study culture that is appropriate and necessary for the respective study phase. An undergraduate bachelor's program at Leuphana College, which aims to open up perspectives, bring disciplines into conversation with one another, lay subject-specific foundations, and focus on initial subject specializations, needs a fundamentally unique study culture. This differs from the study culture of the Leuphana Graduate School, in which it is essential to combine master's and doctoral studies and to enable a stronger research orientation already in the master's program by building a bridge to the doctoral program. Finally, the Professional School is concerned with creating continuing education programs in the sense of lifelong learning, also for students of other ages and levels of experience, and developing these programs on an equal footing with undergraduate programs.

There are also special features in research at Leuphana. The university's consistently interdisciplinary faculties are responsible for four university-wide, i.e. in principle cross-faculty "science initiatives". Education, culture, sustainability, management and entrepreneurship touch on topics that are highly topical in society and each transcend the boundaries of classical disciplines. At Leuphana, for example, professorships from the disciplines of politics, business administration, economics, law, psychology, philosophy, sociology, computer science, ecology and chemistry contribute to sustainability research.

In addition to faculties and institutes, in which the respective disciplinary cultures are cultivated, schools with study phases and science initiatives with transdisciplinary research contexts serve as orienting anchors of the university at Leuphana. In my experience, Leuphana is thus in a good position to connect academic disciplines and thus to be able to conduct discourses and conversations across the boundaries of faculties and subjects - possibly much more so than is possible at other universities.

Leuphana University of Lüneburg has undergone intensive reforms in terms of content and structure over the past 15 years. In 2003, the university became a foundation. In 2005, it merged with the University of Applied Sciences as a model university for the Bologna Process, in parallel with the introduction of bachelor's and master's degree programs. From 2006 on, a reorientation followed with the new study model consisting of College, Graduate School and Professional School, a reorganization of the faculties and science initiatives. Two framework conditions seem significant to me that have made these fundamental processes of change successful. On the one hand, the main decisions on content - as controversial, difficult and protracted as they may have been in detail - were nevertheless widely discussed in the end and taken with a large majority or at least great support from the responsible committees. On the other hand, the university was always able to rely

on the stability of its administration and its organizational processes throughout all the upheavals - here, too, despite all the justified criticism in detail. Foundation, merger and realignment have left hardly a stone unturned at Leuphana over the past 15 years - initially exacerbated by a cut in the state subsidy of around 15% between 2003 and 2006, with considerable effects on the staff situation. The new freedom as a foundation university, the different cultures of the predecessor institutions brought together by the merger, the cuts in budget and personnel, as well as the fundamentally new structures of the realignment, naturally led to great changes and at times great uncertainty for the university and its members. In this situation of great uncertainty, it was thanks not only to the university's members, who were extremely committed to research and teaching, but also to the administration that the university was able to continue operating in an orderly fashion. It is reassuring to have experienced how reliably an organization continues existing routines until there is clarity about new routines and new routines are jointly developed and learned: Because the old routines create security in a situation in which new things are only gradually emerging.

It is easy to underestimate how long organizational developments take at a university. It seems to me that at Leuphana, a development cycle that began with merger and realignment is only now gradually coming to a conclusion - shaped by the development of its specific profile and unusual university and educational model. Much still needs to consolidate, and yet there is a clear sense that a next cycle of development is gradually beginning. This new cycle of development is characterized, among other things, by the fact that Leuphana is not only perceived and recognized individually through individuals, projects or working groups, but also increasingly institutionally as a whole university with its specific research, teaching and study profile in the middle of German universities. Topics of the university are seen beyond individuals also structurally as overarching topics of the university, for example digitality, sustainability, entrepreneurship or teacher education. One challenge of this development phase will thus be to structurally support the potential that has existed to date in the interaction of individuals or groups in such a way that systemic development dynamics can be strengthened - that is, systemic dynamics are increasingly able to integrate and promote individual dynamics.

I am convinced that a good development of universities, which pleases all those involved, is also characterized to a large extent by the fact that through the interaction of its members in the interplay of their respective individual motivations, abilities and interests, they jointly generate more energy than the individual actors put into it in total. To create organizational conditions for this, which guarantee the free development of the university members with their respective individual motivations, abilities and interests and at the same time enable their interaction through a common understanding and a common university culture, I consider an important prerequisite for the further development of the university.

Leuphana has chosen an ambitious development path in recent years. It is only at the beginning of this path. For the future, I wish the university that it will not slacken in this ambition. If it continues

to follow this path consistently, the university will be able to develop ever stronger impulses for the personal development of its members as well as for society as a whole. It will be a path that will continue to cost a lot of energy due to the content-related demands, but for precisely this reason it will be a joy not only at the end, but also on the path itself - for the individual members of the university in studies, research and teaching as well as for society as a whole. At the same time, the path will be all the easier to follow the more the university is at the center of society; the more it finds ways to open itself constructively to partners from society who are as diverse as possible; the more it succeeds in actively integrating these partners into the university in research, teaching and studies; and the more the diversity of these partners protects the necessary independence of the university.

At the end, I return to the beginning. My own studies were characterized by the experience of being allowed to dare to do something and being encouraged to learn about new perspectives. The university can and must create the necessary framework conditions for this. But apart from the organizational structures and formats, which of course form an important framework, it is above all the people who shape and form the university: Students who have the courage to go their own way and encourage each other to do so; teachers who engage with students in what the university has in common; researchers who have the courage to try something new and unusual. From my perspective, the most important thing for the further development of Leuphana may be: The university is also a social place; a place for motivated, creative and characterful scientists, students and administrative staff; a place where its members and guests like to go and find life - scientific life, of course, but also social life. In this sense, the university is both a place of scientific and social discovery. This personal and at the same time common discovery needs freedom, courage and reliable organizational conditions. It can take place when people meet and think together and argue together. In short: when people embark together on this venture of the university.