

University culture for education and science

Christian Brei

Speech for the dies academicus 2023 of Leuphana University Lüneburg

July 5, 2023

Dear guests of the dies academicus,

Leuphana is a wonderful place. This place is wonderful because development takes place at the university: Because new worlds open up through academic knowledge. Because through study, personal paths in life become possible that previously seemed unthinkable. Because new insights arise through research, which create new possibilities for social action, which make a good, at least a better life possible.

But Leuphana is also a wonderful place because we develop ourselves quickly and powerfully, both qualitatively and quantitatively:

- We established a new faculty last year. A new Institute of Advanced Studies has begun its work. We are providing impetus for law school reform nationwide. And we have just submitted an application for our first Cluster of Excellence, to name just a few examples of content.
- Since 2006, the number of our full-time employees has increased by 400. Our third-party funding volume has increased almost fivefold, the number of our publications has increased almost tenfold, the third-party funding from the DFG is almost 25 times higher and our citations are almost 200 times higher than in 2006.
- We are ranked 11th nationwide by the German National Academic Foundation.
- In the Times Higher Education ranking, we are among the best 100 of all young universities under 50 worldwide and among the best 400 of all universities overall. Seven of our subjects are among the best 500 in the Shanghai ranking. All of our five faculties are now among the top in Lower Saxony with their focus areas.

This rapid and gratifying growth is the result of great efforts by our researchers, faculty and students. We can be proud of them as a university community. But they are also the result of the supportive work of the university administration, which is often not in the spotlight in the same way. For the great efforts of the colleagues in the university administration, who make the scientific achievements of this university possible through their supportive work on the basis of all legal, financial or organizational requirements, I would therefore like to say a very big thank you today on behalf of the Presidential Board.

This thanks is all the more important because the great growth presents the university with entirely new challenges - and especially the university administration:

- New qualitative requirements: New research formats, study programs, knowledge exchange formats or collaborations.
- New quantitative requirements: More research projects, study programs, collaborations, events, employees, spaces or resources to organize.
- New social and regulatory requirements: for example in the areas of compliance, data protection, occupational safety, fire protection, IT security, sustainability, equality, diversity, co-determination.
- In addition, there is an increasing number of crises: e.g. climate change, energy transition, Ukraine war, demographic change, digitalization, migration. These crises repeatedly affect the organization of our university, either indirectly or directly.

Against this background, we all feel that our work is becoming more strenuous. The demands on our work are increasing. More tasks have to be performed. Our work is becoming both more complicated and more complex: On the one hand, the logical and formal dependencies are increasing, and on the other hand, the complexity and content-related interactions between goals, measures, projects. And sometimes there are also conflicting goals.

For the university, and in particular for university administration and science management, this raises a central question: How do we manage to organize an ever-improving and ever-larger academic enterprise with an ever-tighter organizational framework in such a way that science, research, teaching and studies can continue to flourish and thrive in the best possible and smoothest way in the future? And what do we all need in order to deal well with the new challenges outlined above, which are, after all, also being brought to us to a large extent from outside?

What we need for this are, of course, strong ideas. What we need for this are, of course, reliable and transparent processes and resources. But what we also need is a strong university culture - a culture of warm-heartedness, of closeness, of human and personal closeness. And I ask myself what this culture can look like in concrete terms. Here are seven thoughts:

1. We are allowed to meet each other **personally** in a culture of **appreciation**. This is one of our great strengths as a university: Our students are more than just a matriculation number for us. Our professors live for us not only in the ivory tower of science. For us, our colleagues are more than just a box on an organizational chart. We meet each other personally. We challenge and encourage each other personally. We are interested in each other as individual personalities. And we are allowed to meet each other as equals - always in recognition of our different experiences and responsibilities.
2. We are allowed to **trust** each other. As simple as it sounds, it is sometimes difficult in practice. But my experience is that trust is the most important basis for successful cooperation. And above all: we can assume that we all want something good, that we are committed with all our

strength, that our counterpart also wants to contribute to the cause with everything he or she can.

3. We should be in **dialogue with** each other. We not only manage to regularly bring together the members of a department, the teachers and students of a study program, the researchers of a subject. We must also manage - and we have better conditions for this than many other universities - to bring colleagues and students together across the boundaries of departments and institutions. This dialogue is more than just a conversation. This dialogue is also necessary because we must necessarily develop solutions to increasingly complex challenges from different perspectives - in research, in studies, and especially in administration. Where we are not yet able to do this, we can and want to become even better.
4. We are allowed to give ourselves **feedback** – critical, but constructive; clear on the matter, but sensitive in the wording. Within teams, between different teams and departments, but also with external stakeholders of the university. We are allowed to be open and unconcerned, because feedback is a personal and organizational prerequisite for learning.
5. We are allowed to make **mistakes**, at least as long as they are not willful, intentional or negligent. Mistakes happen to all of us. What is crucial is how we deal with them: Mistakes are also learning opportunities, personally for colleagues, for teams and for the organization. We can accept mistakes, deal with them openly and discuss them, here as well, in order to learn from them together and become better as a university.
6. We must be **transparent**. Information about processes, about resources, about goals, about measures that is transparent for all those involved is a decisive prerequisite for good cooperation in an increasingly large and complex organization. Transparency is not an intrinsic value, but in turn a prerequisite for building trust and for a practice of dialog.
7. We are allowed to be **innovative**. Leuphana thrives on new ideas. Since 2006, we have successfully positioned ourselves as an innovation university in Lower Saxony, not only in research, teaching and studies, but also in university administration. Our colleagues in the departments, facilities, faculties and schools are extremely knowledgeable and creative experts in their respective fields of work. This is a good basis for new ideas. So, we are allowed to be courageous. We are allowed to take risks in order to try out something new and better. We have often done this in the past - let us continue to do so in order to continue to shape a culture of innovation in the future.

The university culture that I am trying to describe with these thoughts already exists in many places. Each and every one of us knows corresponding moments from our everyday work. Let us continue to strengthen these and other moments of a good university culture. Because a good culture helps us to

deal well and collectively with the increasing challenges of the future. Many thanks to all members of the university for this - and thanks also to all friends and companions of the university who support us from the outside.

Finally: We all bear a responsibility. For educational and life paths. For the freedom of research. For the possibility of new knowledge. And at the end of the day for a better society, especially in times of increasing crises. Perhaps our most important task is therefore: to cultivate a culture of freedom and responsibility and, if necessary, to protect it. I would like to thank you from the bottom of my heart for developing this culture of responsibility together, for being available to answer questions and for getting involved when necessary - in science, in studies and in administration.