

New Year's speech by the President of Leibniz University Hannover at the 2024 New Year's reception

Ladies and gentlemen,

I wish you a happy and – above all – healthy and peaceful new year. How nice that you have taken up our invitation to the LUH New Year's reception and we are able to meet here in person again after four years.

I am pleased to welcome the following people:

- *Joachim Schachtner, Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Science and Culture*
- *Thomas Hermann, Mayor of the City of Hannover*
- *Wilhelm Mestwerdt, President of the State Court of Lower Saxony*
- *The members of the German Parliament, the State Parliament, and the city and municipal councils*
- *The presidents of Lower Saxony's higher education institutions and other state bodies, as well as the heads of non-state organisations and companies*
- *Our university's honorary senators, citizens and doctors*
- *And my two predecessors, Erich Barke and Ludwig Schätzl*

My dear guests,

Let me begin with the newest development: As of 1 January 2024, Leibniz University Hannover is no longer directly sponsored by the state, but is instead sponsored by the Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz Universität Hannover Public Law Foundation, a foundation under public law. The following film makes clear what this means for Leibniz University:

[*Film: Implementing the foundation model– What does that mean?*](#)

Ladies and gentlemen,

The transfer of Leibniz University Hannover from state sponsorship to the sponsorship of a foundation under public law is – as the film shows – a win for us. We can shape our future more autonomously. And with respect to the foundation assets indicated: Do not hesitate, dear guests, to also invest financially in a university in your region with strong development potential.

To conclude this topic I would once again like to thank all our university members for being open to the possibilities and chances offered by the foundation model during our internal university process.

The change in sponsorship was a collective decision. We made it with a high degree of consensus, to the benefit of our university.

As you likely noticed in the invitations to the New Year's reception, we are trying out a new format for the event we are all familiar with this year. A central reason for this is the university's financial situation and our wish to return to the original aim of the New Year's reception. The reception is intended as a networking event designed to strengthen the exchange between actors from academia, business and politics. We would like to network more intensively with members of the city's society. This is why we're here and why we're pleased to be able to welcome you. We hope you support this decision and that you are looking forward to the in-person exchange and discussion following the pandemic-related interruption of the event.

Together we did an outstanding job – please indulge the self-praise – of overcoming the pandemic at our university. Even now looking back, I can say that we always managed to deal with the virus in an appropriate way. We continued our teaching and research without interruption. In particular, all of the students were able to continue their studies without delay, even in the labs. In keeping with our understanding of our role, we returned to on-campus teaching as soon as possible. We are an on-campus university that thrives not only on the discourse between the instructors and students, but also on the discourse between students. Making this possible is part of our DNA!

If we look back at 2023, there is a high level of agreement. The past year was not a good one for the world. February will mark the two-year anniversary of Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, in contravention of international law. The Hamas terror attack on Israel on 7 October 2023 was a crime against humanity and represents a threat to all of us. The enduring wars are an ongoing catastrophe, not only for Europe but also for world as a whole. Above all, they are a catastrophe for the civilian population. There is no way to justify the death toll being inflicted upon them. I am stunned and deeply distressed when I think of the victims, who include many children. This is why I am at a loss as to whether and how peace is even possible given the high price paid in terms of the number of people killed.

Nevertheless, please allow me to take a brief look back at LUH. I will start with our building projects, which are a visual manifestation of our successes in research and teaching. The first three research buildings I will list, which we acquired through competitive processes, exemplify this. We are very proud of the fact that we are not only highly successful in these competitions on an ongoing basis, but have also always been among the top three in Germany for several years.

The SCALE research building at the Mechanical Engineering Campus in Garbsen is nearing completion. The XXL building has been constructed to facilitate research on production engineering of large components and is awaiting the installation of the large-scale devices. The goal is to carry out research on

scale-independent and modular production engineering. We are very optimistic that we will inaugurate the building this year.

In July 2023 we laid the foundation stone for the Forum Wissenschaftsreflexion research building. Over the last few years, the COVID-19 pandemic has clearly shown us the essential role of research in the overall development of our society. In this regard, defining the benefits and limits of science is particularly important. The new research branch interdisciplinary studies of science focuses on such challenges within the scientific system.

As president, what especially pleases me is that we will soon be one of the few universities in Germany that have a research building for humanities and social sciences at all. Construction work is scheduled for completion in late summer 2025.

The new OPTICUM research building at the Wissenschaftspark Marienwerder unites the various optical technologies disciplines. With the new OPTICUM research building, the LUH is creating a location that enhances our identity and serves as a visual address for top-notch research work, including that undertaken as part of the PhoenixD Cluster of Excellence. Work on the building began in fall 2023, the foundation stone will be laid in April of this year and construction is scheduled to be completed in 2026.

Now let us move beyond these competitively acquired research buildings to three additional building projects that are important for us. First, the Large Wave Flume – or GWK+.

In summer last year, we inaugurated the 'centrepiece' of the Coastal Research Centre with Robert Habeck, the Federal Minister for Economic Affairs and Climate Protection, in attendance, and received significant media coverage. Offshore energy production and coastal protection are the predominant research areas given the impacts of climate change. Through the expansion and modernisation of the 'old' GWK, the wave current flume is now a large-scale research facility that is one of a kind globally. No research facility in the world besides the GWK+ can simultaneously generate waves and current. The project again demonstrates our strengths in researching renewable energies and our pioneering role within university research in the field of coastal engineering.

Two months ago we were able to open the campus for teacher education in the Nordstadt following three years of construction. This is an important milestone for LUH, to finally bring together all the areas of teacher training in one location and, above all, to give the over 5,000 teaching students a home.

At the end of the year, construction on a new Digital Innovation Campus will begin at the Schneiderberg/Appelstraße grounds in the Nordstadt. This will be an institute building for IT with a research focus in the areas of artificial intelligence and IT security. This research and innovation centre is in-

tended to accelerate the broad-based transfer of technologies, methods and digital skills to the business sector from the relevant research as part of the digital transformation. For this reason, a start-up centre to support start-ups and spin-offs is also planned as part of the overall project, in addition to the office space and subject-specific workspaces.

Ladies and gentlemen,

These are impressive research buildings that equip us well for the future – but our pleasure is not without reservation. We continue to have a significant backlog in renovation, retrofit and redevelopment work in our existing buildings (it has now reached over half a billion euros and continues to increase), which we are not able to reduce at the desired or necessary level. The funding for building maintenance and the most urgent renovation measures is nowhere near adequate. For 180 buildings, we receive €4.5 million in building maintenance funding annually. However, in order to keep the infrastructure for teaching and research functioning, we require €30 million per year for building maintenance. Without an increase in the core funding, which has remained the same for the past 16 years – with the exception of wage increases – we will not be able to maintain research and teaching operations in the current form.

Unfortunately, the funding programme *zukunft.niedersachsen*, supplemented by the special dividends from the proceeds of the listing of the Porsche AG, does not help us in this area. Naturally, we will use the funding that we have yet to acquire for a variety of formats (academic rooms, academic alliances, Cluster of Excellence funding, future labs) to increase LUH's competitiveness. But the funding has clear conditions: no permanently implemented measures, building projects are excluded, and the funding horizon is set at five years.

This funding will not do away with the renovations backlog, the low wages for the professors in national comparison, and the insufficient core funding. And this brings me to the point where I put my New Year's speeches from previous years on 'repeat'. As though it were a mantra, I explain each year once again that from the perspective of the university management it is not possible to compensate for the large financial gaps with 'cosmetic' and media-friendly measures. In concrete terms, this means the following: newly developed funding measures and project ideas are of no use if rain is leaking through the university roof at the same time.

And now for a change in topic, ladies and gentlemen:

LUH is successfully represented in the Excellence Strategy of the federal and state governments with its Clusters of Excellence PhoenixD, QuantumFrontiers and Hearing4all. We have demonstrated our competitiveness impressively. The university management is also supporting promising Cluster of Excellence initiatives in order to ensure Leibniz University Hannover's success in the Excellence Strategy

competition, as well as the renewal of the university's qualification for the Universities of Excellence funding line.

The timeline of the application process for the University of Excellence title is tight. Contingent upon the acquisition of at least two Clusters of Excellence, LUH is currently preparing for this procedure. We began with a process for identifying the central ideas, which we initiated for all employees in April 2023.

Parallel to this, we submitted three outlines for new Clusters of Excellence in implant research, scientific ethics and data science. The declarations of intent for the existing clusters are in progress and will be submitted in the coming days. Following the evaluation, the decision about which of our clusters will receive funding will be made in 2025.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone who participated by proposing their ideas and actively representing their interests in the discussion. As a whole it has been a very impressive process, at the end of which – contingent upon the renewed funding of at least two Clusters of Excellence – we will be able to submit a well-thought out application to become a University of Excellence. It will be an application that will contribute to movement and development across the university.

For us, the Excellence Strategy is above all also a motor for inner-university development. It increases the quality of research and teaching, strengthens international competitiveness and supports the development of specialisations.

The EULiST network also contributes to strengthening international competitiveness.

As president, it is important to me to head an 'internationally well-positioned, visibly research-driven university'. This is one of the reasons we initiated the EULiST – European Universities Linking Society and Technology alliance three years ago. Our application was successful, and in fall 2023 the European EULiST network took up its work. Together with nine partners, our university has acquired funding within the framework of the European Commission's European University initiative. This is a tremendous success – for EULiST and, of course, directly for us. I would like to express my gratitude to the core EULiST team and to all the colleagues and students who contributed to the application process and who have also ensured that EULiST is already an agile network at different levels of the universities!

Ladies and gentlemen,

To ensure LUH's ability to function effectively in future and its innovative capacity, our transition to sponsorship by a foundation under public law is the right direction. More autonomy, leeway and con-

trol will help us make our potential in research, teaching and knowledge transfer more visible and enable us to utilise it more fully. We are already one of the most research-intensive universities in Germany, and we will make the university as a whole an even more internationally attractive location for knowledge production and transfer.

What is essential here is teaching, which is facing significant challenges. Particularly against the backdrop of the pandemic, it needs to be realigned and redesigned – always in line with societal requirements. Our Teaching Constitution, which entered into force last year, provides a framework for this. At the same time, though, it is also our clear commitment to excellence in teaching, as well as to the development of new and innovative degree programmes. In this way, we are addressing the shortage of skilled workers and – I am speaking explicitly to our guests from the business sector here – creating the 'human resources' you require.

The successes of this institution to date have required significant effort from all the university's members. They have made this effort from a place of intrinsic motivation and will continue to do so. For this I would like to thank you very much on behalf of the Presidential Board: Thank you for working together with us.

There are also many other topics that we dealt with last year or that will occupy us in the coming year. Not all of them can be mentioned in this speech, as I am coming to the end.

As part of our society, science and academia are also facing crises. We have experienced this intensively in recent years. The overlapping of numerous interconnected crises has clearly shown us how important it is to find a good form of crisis management. Science and academia are capable of this. Based on years of experience investigating complex phenomena and developments, the scientific community is capable of identifying ways out of crisis. It can provide society, the political sphere and also the business sector with expert, evidence-based guidance.

It can also provide support in promoting discourse and dialogue, even in difficult periods for our democracy. The motto of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research's Science Year 2024 is 'freedom'. Let us remind ourselves: As of 2024, the Basic Law (Grundgesetz) has guaranteed our freedom and formed the basis of our democratic society for 75 years. It grants us comprehensive personal freedoms. Nevertheless, our own history teaches us that freedom is not a given: Freedoms often have to be fought for, defended or renegotiated. This takes all of us: you and me! This year we will be putting on several events to do with this important topic. I cordially invite you to attend.

Please remain optimistic and continue to be supportive of us.

Thank you for your attention.