

**Speech by Prof. Dr. Jutta Günther**

**at the New Year's reception of unifreunde e.V. on January 29, 2024<sup>1</sup>**

Dear Mayor,

Dear Senator Moosdorf,

Dear Councillor of State Strebl,

Dear Members of Bremen's State Parliament,

Dear Mr. Hoedemaker,

Dear Mr. Protasov,

Dear Colleagues,

Dear Students,

Thank you very much for coming!

I am not sure if you feel the same, but for me, the annual New Year's reception that unifreunde organizes for us is a special highlight at the beginning of the year because it gives us the opportunity to personally greet the newly appointed professors from both universities and to welcome them to Bremen. We will later briefly introduce and welcome our new colleagues. I would like to thank unifreunde very much for hosting the New Year's reception.

The beginning of the new year, even though it was 29 days ago, invites us to look at the past year's university events. It would be impossible to detail EVERYTHING, but I would like to give a few insights that are illustrative of our work.

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The spoken word is binding.

I will begin with our colleagues at the Institute of Environmental Physics, who are able to be part of a project of the European Space Agency ESA. Together with several European partners, they are developing Earth observation satellites to enhance the tools and methods for analyzing sea ice. Without precise measurement data – in this case from remote observation – we could not combat the climate crisis.

The Faculty of Health Sciences commenced a project that is a novelty in nursing science research. Up to now, there was not a single place in long-term care where teaching, research, and care were all carried out at the same time. This is now possible through the TCALL project, which is funded by the BMBF. Research, nursing services, and training in a socially highly relevant area all work together here.

Last year, we opened the “Campus Nord für Frankreich & Francophonie” – an initiative from the Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Studies at the University of Bremen in collaboration with the Universität Flensburg and the University of Rostock. It is the first center for the study of France in northern Germany and will focus not only on France, but in particular on the Francophonie, and deal with the complex interdependencies of the colonial context – in research, teaching, and knowledge transfer.

In the Faculty of Education and Educational Sciences, I would like to highlight a project that our trust foundations support, which also has a very large social benefit:

The project focuses on ZDL, which stands for Zielorientiertes Dialogisches Lesen (*Goal-oriented dialogical reading*). This is a method that one of our researchers developed and tested in daycare centers to

promote children's language skills. She is now using ZDL with her students to conduct research in primary schools in order to promote language acquisition. At the same time, this lightens the teachers' loads and helps the children to better participate in the lessons.

At the University of Bremen, we like to combine research, teaching, and knowledge transfer in many projects. This is also the case in the context of the conference entitled “Debating, Opposing, Protesting – Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Linguistic Practices of Contradiction.” This international conference was organized by students for advanced bachelor's and master's students to test their skills in an international context and present their projects.

I would now like to highlight the university's achievements of the past year in the scientifically highly esteemed *ERC – European Research Council* funding. The ERC has four types of grants: *Starting, Consolidator, and Advanced Grants* are awards for individual outstanding research, and the fourth type of funding – the *Synergy Grants* – are awards for small research collectives. Every application poses a risk – you compete with the whole world to hopefully carry out your project at a university in Europe while facing a multi-stage selection process. You need courage and a lot of patience.

The entire research landscape eagerly awaits the announcement of the selected projects. In the spring of last year, we were very pleased that an *ERC Advanced Grant* in Robotics was awarded to Michael Beetz.

When the winners of the *Starting Grants* were announced in September, we were thrilled that our Romance philologist Julia Borst was among

them. She is a literary scholar and researches Afro-European communities in the digital space.

In October, the *Synergy Grants* were announced, and we received an impressive three of these grants, all in the field of marine, polar, and climate research: Kai-Uwe Hinrichs and Wolfgang Bach from the MARUM and Gerrit Lohmann, cooperation professor with the AWI, who works closely with the Institute of Environmental Physics.

Eventually, when the *Consolidator Grants* were announced in November, we rejoiced when we learned that Michael Sentef had been awarded one. He conducts research in theoretical solid-state physics and is here tonight as a newly appointed professor.

The university had never before been successful in all four funding lines in one year, and it is rare. We can be proud of these achievements!

As president, it is of course wonderful for me to report on our many successes. However, it is also important to remember that even brilliant applications can fail – because the funds are limited, because selection processes have their own dynamics, because your idea may be far ahead of your time, and for a variety of other reasons.

Failure – which is often a taboo topic – is part of life. What matters, of course, is that we get up again and again, and are able to reflect on and correctly classify both successes and failures within this competitive science system.

We have achieved a lot in all teaching and research areas of the university. This would not have been possible without our many

colleagues in technical, administrative, and campus operation positions, who provide and maintain the needed infrastructure, laboratories, office support, and much more for research and teaching.

I would therefore like to thank ALL employees of the University of Bremen – all of you and the students ARE the university!

We also made great progress this last year in another aspect of our university with our new mission statement. This was fundamentally revised in a large process in order to give sustainability, climate justice, and climate neutrality, which are pressing issues of our time, a central place in our mission statement.

The Academic Senate unanimously approved the mission statement in November. The changes made were not due to following a random zeitgeist, but recognizing the signs of the times and addressing these in a prominent place.

I quote from the introduction: “We are committed to our shared responsibility for the social and ecological changes needed worldwide, for democracy, diversity, and justice.”

The most recent discoveries of blatantly anti-democratic and inhumane aspirations alarmed us at the university and me as the president. These plans made at the extreme fringes of our society are a threat to the people of my university and a danger for academic freedom. Bremen’s academic institutions countered these monstrosities with a combined open declaration titled “Democracy. Diversity. Open-mindedness.”

It was an encouraging experience to see how quickly and unitedly my colleagues from the leadership of the universities and institutes of UBRA rallied around the declaration.

Today, like every year around January 27, the University of Bremen holds an event to remember the victims of National Socialism. We find ourselves again caught in a world of increasing wars, and remind ourselves of the tragedies of the Holocaust, of the murder of millions, of war, as well as the lessons that can be learned from all of this – from the Atlantic Charter to the Nuremberg Trials to the establishment of the United Nations. The most important of these lessons found their way into the German constitution (Grundgesetz). These form the basis for the democracy on which our university stands; they are the spirit of freedom, without which the university would not exist.

When these values and lessons are fundamentally attacked, such as by Hamas' terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians on October 7, or with Putin's invasion of the Ukraine in February 2022, the shock waves reach us as well, and the foundation we stand on also begins to shake.

If our house is to retain its foundational democratic and independent spirit of research and not collapse, we cannot afford to be indifferent or lack in empathy and solidarity. We extend these to the victims of Hamas' terrorist attacks and their loved ones, to those who are still being held hostage by Hamas. Our empathy and solidarity also extend to the civilian Palestinian victims who died at the hands of the Israeli military, as well as to the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, who are in danger of hunger and partially cut off from humanitarian aid. Our thoughts are with those who are threatened by any form of attack to the foundation of universal values, rule-based public order, and human rights. They are with those who, as in the Ukraine, are leading a desperate war to fight against such attacks.

Our solidarity encompasses a steadfast rejection of intolerance and terrorism. We resolutely reject antisemitism in any form – and have no tolerance towards attacks on Jews. Our solidarity obviously means that we unwaveringly reject Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in every form.

Universities are not islands. This is especially palpable right now. We are part of society – in the middle of it. Our mission statement reads: “Social responsibility has been the fundamental guiding principle of the University of Bremen since its establishment.” To this end, we form a responsible academic community in Bremen, with the goal of serving the pursuit of knowledge and truth and being an inspiring place of education for young people.

You, my dear new appointees, are the newest part of this community. Most of you joined as university professors in one of our 12 faculties, some with cooperation professorships working with one of the external institutes.

I would like to welcome you all and will now greet you individually.

In the Faculty of Physics and Electrical Engineering, I extend a warm welcome to

- Amir Ebrahimi: Power Electronics with a focus on Drive Technology
- Michael Sentef: Theoretical Solid-state Physics

In the Faculty of Biology and Chemistry, I welcome

- Sami Hassan: Systems Neurobiology
- Matthew Nielsen: Functional Ecology of Insects

In the Faculty of Mathematics and Computer Science, I extend greetings to

- Nico Hochgeschwender: Software Engineering for Cognitive Robotics
- Dirk Lorenz: Applied and Industrial Mathematics

In the Faculty of Geosciences, I welcome

- Morten Iversen: Geobiological Oceanography  
He is a cooperation professor with AWI in Bremerhaven.

In the Faculty of Law, I welcome

- Julia Genuess: Criminal Law and Criminal Procedure
- Katharina Reiling: Public Law
- Frederick Rieländer: Civil Law

In the Faculty of Social Sciences, I wish to welcome

- Sophia Hunger: Computational Social Sciences
- Wiebke Rabe: International Relations with a Focus on Global Resource Politics
- Markus Tepe: Political System of the Federal Republic of Germany
- Sarah Berens: Global Social Policy
- Raimund Bleischwitz: Global Sustainable Resources

In the Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Studies, I welcome

- Christian Kirchmeier: Contemporary German Literature
- Arne Peters: Anthropological Linguistics

And in the Faculty of Human and Health Sciences, I welcome

- Melanie Böckmann: Global Health
- Louisa Kulke: Developmental Psychology
- Nadira Faber: Social Psychology

We look forward to your participation in the university.



The year 2024 will be full with the academic activities that are already in planning, but will likely also hold many surprises. Some of the planned activities are already waiting in the wings.

We are anticipating the results of the first round of the Excellence Strategy. The University of Bremen submitted three proposals for potential new Excellence Clusters in the fields of materials science, in cognitive robotics, and in social sciences.

The MARUM will submit an application for continuation of the “Ocean Floor” cluster, which has received Excellence funding since 2006. We will find out this Friday whether and which of the three new topics will be asked to submit a full proposal.

That three new topics are being considered and that MARUM is submitting an application for continuation is thanks to the extraordinary dedication of the teams, their active commitment and tireless efforts, and their ability to present their visions for future scientific breakthroughs in this initiative. What we can already count in our favor is that we have strong and consolidated areas, which, in every conceivable case, will continue to produce internationally visible research in the upcoming years.

Enough about the Excellence Strategy.

What else is awaiting us this year?

For the first time, we will admit new students for the summer semester. This is a novelty and the resonance has been positive so far, with over 500 applications in STEM and social sciences degree programs.

Beginning this winter semester, we will begin the new master's degree program "Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy," after overcoming several hurdles while setting this up.

I would like to mention in conclusion that the BMBF gave this academic year the motto "freedom." In the university, we have already begun planning several forms of events on the topic of "academic freedom." I am looking forward to these!

Ladies and gentlemen,

the start of a new year does not eliminate any of our concerns or free us from any problem areas. However, it does give us the chance to learn from the past – both on a small and larger scale – and provides us with another 336 days to use our voices

for democracy – diversity – open-mindedness.

Thank you very much!