

## **Speech by President Prof. Dr. Jutta Günther**

**at the New Year's Reception of unifreunde e.V. on January 28, 2025<sup>1</sup>**

Dear Senator Moosdorf,

Dear members of the State Parliament of Bremen,

Dear Mr. Hoedemaker,

Dear new appointees,

Dear students,

Dear colleagues,

Dear esteemed guests,

I am very pleased to welcome you to the New Year's reception, which the unifreunde have graciously been hosting for us for so many years.

We are very excited to welcome our new appointees this evening and look forward to working together in the future. However, I would like to begin this evening by reflecting on the year 2024.

The past year has been a pivotal one for the university. When we met here one year ago for the previous New Year's Reception, we were all very excited about an announcement to be made a few days later, the results of the preliminary selection of new Cluster of Excellence topics. We knew at the time that our existing "The Ocean Floor" Cluster of Excellence would be eligible to submit a renewal proposal. It was unclear whether we would prevail, with 143 applying institutions nationwide, in

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<sup>1</sup> The spoken word is binding.

securing at least one additional cluster, which would put us on the path to regaining our status as a University of Excellence. We succeeded!

With our “Martian Mindset” application, we now have two full proposals in the running. In the past year, both proposals were submitted and then defended before an international group of experts. Both teams have done outstanding work. We now eagerly await the decision on funding on May 22.

Being allowed to submit a second cluster full proposal was and remains a pivotal point for us. As a result, we had to determine whether to apply within the Universities of Excellence funding line, and, if so, in which constellation. After obtaining political approval, a swift decision was made to proceed with submitting a proposal, followed by brief deliberation involving whether to submit as a single institution or as a consortium of universities.

Our direct neighbor, the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, had also been able to position itself very well in the preliminary round. Together, we had four full proposals for clusters in the race. The success of our joint application was contingent upon the approval of at least three clusters, and with the two universities already working closely together on “The Ocean Floor” cluster, there was no reason to seek a competitive strategy over a collaborative one.

Since we decided to proceed with the joint application, we have worked intensively together to prepare said application, and hope to submit this soon.

There is definitely more to our partnership with the University of Oldenburg than just calculus in terms of Excellence funding. We have a decades-long connection that goes back to the very beginnings of both universities. We are two reform universities that have maintained this eagerness for interdisciplinary and unconventional approaches, which promote cutting-edge research based on social responsibility, and place sustainability at the heart of their mission statements.

This past year's efforts have entailed much more than just Excellence activities. With the following examples, I would like to draw attention to the entire breadth of our activities.

I will start with our dedicated students and teachers.

As part of our strategic partnership with Cardiff University, the Sustainability & Entrepreneurship workshop took place again last year. Students from both universities and from varying disciplines, ranging from mathematics and computer science to earth sciences to communication and economics, joined forces in small teams to develop sustainable business ideas. This workshop series began as a virtual endeavor during the pandemic. Two years later, holding the event in presence became possible, and it has developed into a great success.

Students in the master's program Public Health provide another great example of the positive impact of our activities. They have worked hand-in-hand with Bremen healthcare institutions over a period of three semesters to develop solutions to practical problems, such as overcoming language barriers in hospitals or improving the support of caregivers. Their work culminated in a symposium to present the results.

These two activities are representative of many innovative teaching formats, and they would not exist without the commitment and dedication of individual teachers. I emphasize this because teachers in a very research-focused academic system tend to have little incentive to make extra efforts in teaching. Therefore, I would like to express my special thanks to all those who are doing an outstanding job here. It is our joint task, together with the scientific community, to tackle this imbalance in the system.

This year, the DAAD prize for outstanding achievements of international students was awarded to French doctoral student Jody Danard.

She is a member of the French Literature working group and is not only distinguished by her excellent academic work, but also by her social commitment and her special merits in public outreach to schools. Jody Danard represents our many committed international students, whom we view as a great asset to the university.

My next example highlights collaborative project research. The Bremen Centre for Media, Communication and Information Research (ZeMKI) was awarded funding for a DFG research unit on the topic of Communicative AI. This research explores automated communication, including voice assistants that receive commands, social bots that can influence debates, and machines that generate texts. The newly established research unit will assess the opportunities and risks for society. The topic could hardly be more relevant!

This exciting social science topic is followed by a groundbreaking scientific discovery made by a chemistry research team. They successfully isolated a nitrene, although these chemical compounds were previously thought to be impossible to isolate. The team's findings were published in the journal *Science*, and the importance of this discovery goes far beyond foundation research. Stable nitrenes can be used, for example, in the chemical industry to catalyze chemical reactions, making them more efficient and thus saving energy. The foundation for these and many other applications was laid here in Bremen.

Science must continuously evolve, and the early-career researchers who embark on a journey through the stages of academic qualification represent its future. This qualification starts with the doctorate, often within a structured program, and we were very pleased that last year we established two new DFG Research Training Groups – both within northern German alliances.

With the University of Oldenburg and its speakers, the HEAR-AZ Research Training Group started. This is an abbreviation for Hearable-Centered Assistance, and is all about hearing research. Early career researchers are doing doctoral research here on issues that contribute to the continuing development of tiny technical assistance systems, known as *hearables*, into a kind of near-ear health center.

The second training group consists of a tripartite alliance with the Technical University of Hamburg and the University of Oldenburg. This computer science training group is named CAUSE, which stands for “Concepts and Algorithms for – and Usage of – Self-Explaining Digitally Controlled Systems.” Its goal is to increase the functionality and security of digitally controlled technical systems, particularly at the physical and digital interfaces of highly complex, composite systems, such as a digitally controlled wind turbine. Even as a layperson (like me), you can easily imagine that there are many applications for these research results.

The University of Bremen has always emphasized the connection to practical applications. There is currently a lot of hype about knowledge and technology transfer. Academic policy has been shifting in favor of an emphasis on this transfer for quite a while. The appeal is that the region’s technological competitiveness can be improved by increasing the frequency and speed of exploiting research results. However, for this to be successful, universities also need professional and substantive infrastructure and support.

Recognizing this need, the Joachim Herz Foundation in Hamburg issued a call for proposals to create something entirely new. It developed a transfer center in the form of a non-profit GmbH at a university that can accelerate the development and application of urgently needed sustainable materials and technologies, and funded the center with 30 million euros. It was clear that there would be very strong competition for this funding, but we wanted to be part of it. Our materials science team made it to the finals and completely won over the jury. All of this happened in addition to extensive work on the full application for “The Martian Mindset” Cluster of Excellence. You can imagine how happy we were. The center began operations in January of this year.

We have made a lot of progress in teaching, research, and outreach over the past year. We have also moved beyond the campus and towards the city center. This was no small feat for our Director of Finance and Administration, who completed the move on time with a skilled team. The university has arrived in the city center. We are very excited about the many new opportunities that come with it.

There is no doubt that things are going well at the University of Bremen. Despite this, not all of our wishes and plans came true. As president, it was of course my sincere wish that all three applications for Clusters of Excellence would be able to submit full applications. The fact that two teams did not succeed is certainly no reflection on their effort, passion, or commitment. In other areas as well, not all wishes were fulfilled. Those who came away empty-handed definitely did not fail. They showed commitment and faced the competition. They were not discouraged and have already begun to work hard in other areas. This deserves our full

respect and support, especially at a time when the competition for funding is increasing enormously. Today, a very good evaluation with a recommendation for funding does not automatically lead to approval.

I am very well aware of the feats of strength that all of you, dear colleagues, perform every day at the university – in research, in teaching, and in outreach. I would like to thank those of you in the academic fields, and the many contributing employees from technology, administration, and service areas as well. Our accomplishments would not exist without all of you in this strong university community.

Dear newly appointed professors, you are now entering this strong community. I would like to welcome you again and will now briefly introduce you individually.

I welcome our new professors to the Faculty of Physics and Electrical Engineering:

- Julienne Stroeve: Polar Observation and Modeling  
She is a collaborative professor with AWI.

In the Faculty of Biology and Chemistry, I welcome

- Anna Beniermann: Biology didactics
- Alice Claßen: Animal ecology
- Katrin Deinhardt: Cell biology
- Judith Hauck: Polar biogeochemical modeling  
She is a collaborative professor with AWI in Bremerhaven.
- Charlotte Havermans: Marine zoology



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

- Daniel Leidner: Cognitive robotics manipulation  
He is a collaborative professor with DLR in Oberpfaffenhofen
- Martin Mundt: Lifelong machine learning

In the Faculty of Production Engineering, I welcome

- Katharina Brinkert: Human space exploration technologies
- David May: Materials technology/fiber-reinforced composites/lightweight construction

He is a collaborative professor with Faserinstitut Bremen

In the Faculty of Geosciences, I welcome

- Sebastian Uhlemann: Environmental geophysics

In the Faculty of Business Studies & Economics, I welcome

- Matthias Klumpp: Retail and logistics management
- Tobias Röth: Technology and innovation

In the Faculty of Social Sciences, I welcome

- Leonie Tuitjer: Human geography with a focus on socio-ecological transformation

In the Faculty of Cultural Studies, I wish to welcome

- Christian Schwarzenegger: Communication and media studies with a focus on media change.

In the Faculty of Linguistics and Literary Studies, I welcome

- Anja Becker: German medieval studies and early modern research up to the end of the 16th century

And in the Faculty of Human and Health Sciences, I extend a warm welcome to

- Barbara Cludius: Clinical psychology and adult psychotherapy
- Lars White: Clinical psychology and pediatric psychotherapy
- Cornelia Frank: Movement sciences
- Ina Hunger: Sports education and sports didactics
- Konrad Stopsack: Epidemiological methods and etiological research

He is a collaborative professor with BIPS.

We are so happy you are here!

Before I look ahead to the new year, I would like to take you back to the beginning of the last year – to January 2024:

Bremen's academic institutions – incidentally, as the first scientific location in Germany – have published a statement, and the title is equally our unwavering commitment: Democracy. Diversity. Open-Mindedness.

A year later, the attack on democratic principles, the rule of law, human rights, and freedom has taken on an extremely alarming, global dimension.

The most effective attack within these anti-democratic aspirations is an attack on the truth itself, on the fact that there is an objective reality that is not subject to “alternative facts” that are arbitrarily created and used at will.

Those who do not value democracy and want to establish authoritarian structures are not concerned with comparing their arguments with reality. They are not interested in fact-checking, on the contrary. The new autocrats' aim is to replace the struggle for an understanding of reality –

academic discourse – with a contest of mere opinions, in which the might of the loudest prevails instead of the much more arduous search for truth.

What does this have to do with us, the University of Bremen? With universities in general? Quite a lot, actually!

We have been observing a global decline in academic liberty for some time, which also affects us in Germany and Bremen. One recent example is the Russian authorities' decision to classify the German Association for East European Studies as an extremist group, which has had a devastating impact on their activities here in Germany.

We are witnessing more and more attacks on academics, including in Bremen. Anyone who communicates unpleasant research findings or represents a field of work that does not fit into the worldview of anti-democratic ideology can expect to be attacked, and this is unfortunately taking place with increased frequency. The aim is to intimidate or silence science.

Here in Germany, academic liberty is cemented into our constitution. However, it would be naive to assume that, given the right election outcome and opportunity, there would not be concerted attempts to change this here as well. One of our most important tasks this year, as in the previous year, will be to resolutely stand up in defense of this liberty and ensure that it remains.

What are additional strategic goals that we will work on in the coming year?

With the University of Oldenburg, we will begin a new chapter of our collaborations and form an alliance with a corresponding memorandum of understanding. We have a host of activities planned or already carried out, for example, in connection with the hoi startup factory. This alliance will not be an alliance of convenience, but one to decidedly connect and strengthen partnerships in the region, and as a next step will connect the non-university institutes and other economic and societal partners.

A further important step, which we have intensely prepared in the Sustainability Commission of the Academic Senate, is the adoption and implementation of our sustainability strategy. We are already on a good path towards this. The Faculties and many other institutions have already begun several activities, which we definitely wish to continue. The sustainability strategy seeks to make these more systematic and to develop a basis for the entire university. An example of our identity as a transformative university in this sense can also be found in the network strategy between Bremen and Oldenburg, which combines individual strategies to come full circle.

This also relates to our role as a European university. As a member of YUFE (Young Universities for the Future of Europe), we will continue to be connected throughout Europe and globally. We have been a member of YUFE for five years now, and we will continue to develop our internationalization strategy beyond Europe. This means that we will form strategic partnerships with universities outside of Europe's borders to extend student exchange programs and create room for reflecting, developing together, and readjusting our focus.

Dear esteemed guests, we have so many plans for the new year. Which of these and to what extent they come to fruition is not entirely within our control.

However, in the face of an uncertain future, we maintain the capacity to take a stand and demonstrate our dedication to the non-negotiable values enshrined in our mission statement, namely democracy, diversity, and open-mindedness.

As University President, it is my primary responsibility to uphold these values. However, I request your assistance in maintaining the integrity of our university as a place of independent research, independent teaching, and independent minds. Thank you very much!