



Speech of the President of the DFG

at the DFG New Year's Reception

Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and the Humanities, Berlin,

Monday, 18 January 2010

[Greeting]

Ministers and Senators,
Undersecretaries of State,
Members of the German Federal Parliament,
Excellencies and Esteemed Members of the Diplomatic Corps,
Presidents and Chancellors,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

In short – dear friends of the DFG,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you to the 2010 New Year's Reception of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft.

I would especially like to greet our distinguished international guests: Your participation clearly reflects that science is indeed an international endeavor and that cooperation on scientific questions and research policies unites us all.

Representatives from all DFG divisions are here tonight and are looking forward to a lively discussion and to a fruitful exchange of information and ideas with you.

[Leibniz Hall]

Ladies and Gentlemen, it has become a long-standing tradition for us to celebrate the start of the year here in the Leibniz Hall of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. And in many ways Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz is a fitting patron – especially for our renowned prize, which will be awarded for the 25th time right here on 15 March.

In fact, this academy itself was founded by Leibniz. I would like to thank Mr. Stock, who is president of this academy, for allowing us to be here tonight.

It is said that Leibniz bore a certain grudge against universities, due to the fact that Leipzig refused to award him a doctoral degree when he was barely twenty years old. For those learned, old men, Leibniz was simply still too young.

However, it is to the universities that I would like to dedicate this evening's celebrations, and I offer my speech in a spirit best described by the motto: "Strengthening the Universities".

[New Year]

But first, I would like to wish you and your families a successful new year, as well as courage for daring projects, many good ideas and imaginative partners with whom you may share and exchange ideas, well-being and that little bit of luck.

Speaking of luck reminds me of trying to find just the right Christmas present. We often promise ourselves that we won't become last-minute shoppers again in the new year. Well, today I have an early book tip that I'd like to share with you.

[Longitude and Research Funding]

The book is entitled *Longitude* by science journalist Dava Sobel. It gives a vivid and precise depiction of the race for the best method of determining longitude for navigation at sea.

In October 1707, a fleet of the British Navy was shipwrecked on the Scilly Islands. Over 2,000 sailors lost their lives. As a consequence, the British Parliament, advised by Isaac Newton and Edmund Halley, passed the Longitude Act in 1714.

A prize of 20,000 pounds was offered for a method of determining a ship's longitude with a maximum deviation of 30 nautical miles after a six weeks' sea voyage to the Caribbean.

The jury, known as the Board of Longitude, was responsible not only for awarding the prize, but also for promoting the development of promising ideas. This was arguably the birth of government funding for research.

The Longitude Act triggered an avalanche of research work and inventions – both real and merely purported. The commission received numerous proposals, for example, for *perpetua mobilia*, just like the ones I receive from time to time.

Surprisingly, the commission continued to exist for over one hundred years. By the time it was disbanded in 1828, it had disbursed more than 100,000 pounds – a huge amount by the standards of the day.

Why am I telling you this? Well, the history told so excitingly in this book contains everything that distinguishes research and research funding today: risk-laden research, well-established mainstream scientists and unconventional young researchers, curiosity, arrogance, intrigues, despair, hope, endurance and, finally, success.

In the end, it was John Harrison, a precision engineer and clock maker, who made the breakthrough in chronometry with his marine chronometer, which was tested by James Cook.

[Strengthen the Universities]

And this was also a grand challenge, a problem of great importance for humanity and for society that could not be addressed by conventional research and development. It could only be surmounted by a diversity of ideas and by a virtually bottom-up approach to basic research.

And this is what the DFG stands for today: the promotion of basic research in all its diversity – including the “big issues” relating to health, energy, climate, mobility, materials, information and security. The DFG represents the competitive funding of people, ideas, projects and structures.

The financial support it provides is utilised above all by the higher education institutions and their researchers, who attract more than 85 percent of the funding provided by the DFG.

For the universities, the past year has been a turbulent one, perhaps as turbulent as the time of the Longitude Act. And 2010 will certainly not be any quieter. In these tumultuous times, the universities must be empowered to carry out their teaching and research activities.

In the last few years, we have made efforts towards strengthening universities and basic research in individual projects and in networks, and we will carry this work forward.

Allow me to mention a few key areas: more freedom through flexibility and overhead funding, start-up funding for young first-time applicants, the strengthening of European and international activities, knowledge transfer, research-oriented gender equality, the Reinhart Koselleck higher-risk projects, the digital information and open access initiatives, improvements regarding doctoral researcher positions and the funding of temporary positions, the continuation of CRC/Transregio programmes, and much more.

[Excellence Initiative and Pacts]

Ladies and Gentlemen, perhaps you have noticed that up to now I have not once used the term “Excellence Initiative”. I have neither avoided it, nor am I weary of this term, although I am trying to keep my “excellence rhetoric” to a minimum.

This may surprise you, but modest reservation actually goes hand in hand with the Excellence Initiative, because – and I never grow tired of explaining this – the Excellence Initiative is not a matter of golden medals or titles, and it is certainly not about the expectation of future excellence. In essence, it is primarily a question of promoting outstanding education and cooperative research based on proven scientific achievements.

For my term of office as President of the DFG, the Excellence Initiative has been and continues to be a defining element. I suspect the same goes for my colleague Peter Strohschneider, who is Chairman of the German Council of Science and Humanities. Our organisations have been cooperating closely on the Excellence Initiative and other projects for many years.

But the Excellence Initiative has an even greater impact on the entire research system: whether by way of the decisions made from 2006 to 2007 or by way of the 3 years it has already been in “operation”. It is almost as though a new geographically dispersed top university had been created, including over 4,000 researchers and about 330 professors, who not only conduct research but also make an intensive contribution to teaching.

Only very few of them and of the thousands of other researchers who are involved in the Excellence Initiative or otherwise funded by the DFG have left behind teaching, which is the foundation of university science and scholarship. They are well aware of the fact that one can only achieve the ideal unity of teaching and research by teaching and conducting research themselves.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the past year has also been defined by the question: What’s next for the Excellence Initiative, for the Higher Education Pact and the Pact for Research and Innovation, referred to together as the “three pacts”?

There has hardly been a speech in the last year, hardly a discussion, in which the continuation of the pacts did not play a part. As you can imagine, it was a very anxious time for all of us.

Until finally, following intense preparations by the research ministers, on 4 June 2009 the Chancellor and the Minister Presidents came to a bold and internationally acclaimed decision: to continue the “three pacts”, with a total of €18 billion, about one-third of which is to be distributed by the DFG.

Just to remind you: The Excellence Initiative received a 30 percent increase in funding.

In addition to new student places, the Higher Education Pact will continue to finance the 20 percent programme overhead for DFG projects, which means significant relief for the universities and more freedom for researchers.

Precisely here in the Higher Education Pact, it can be seen that the funding of teaching and the funding of research have a symbiotic relationship, though they require different forms and formats; it can be seen that they are not in competition and should not be made to compete.

The Pact for Research and Innovation will also be continued for another five years with an annual 5 percent increase in funding. This is also very important to the DFG and the universities, because the annual increase will largely go to the training and promotion of young researchers.

When the German Parliament elections came in September, suspense mounted again. In the end, we were pleased to learn that the new coalition agreement confirmed the continuation of the three pacts, reaffirming that science and research remain a high priority.

The roadmap for the next phase of the Excellence Initiative has already been announced. Last week saw the first information events for universities, and in March there will be commission meetings and a call for proposals. And so it will proceed, step by step, until the funding decisions are made in June 2012.

[\[Strengthening Universities through Cooperation\]](#)

The Excellence Initiative has made a major contribution towards strengthening the universities in terms of profile building, research activities and teaching activities. Almost one-third of all universities are involved in the initiative.

And the universities have become strong partners in collaborations with non-university research institutions. In my opinion, this progress must continue and, if necessary, take new forms.

But new collaborations and forms of cooperation – for example the intensification of federal programmes for medical research – have to be developed in partnership and on a level playing field. And they must originate in quality-oriented competition at an international level, which is where the DFG can offer its support.

The universities also have to be strengthened in their collaborations with institutions embedded in industry and society. For this reason the DFG has begun to expand the opportunities for knowledge transfer from DFG-funded projects.

We have plans to intensify this approach later this year. In an information campaign, we will be emphasising that knowledge transfer from DFG-funded projects is among the DFG's most important cross-sectional tasks and that knowledge transfer is possible from all branches of science.

At the same time, we must not impose transfer expectations on all DFG projects or allow transfer potential to influence the funding priority of projects.

In the supervision, evaluation and judgement of projects, we will continue to improve the conditions for knowledge transfer, which might include anything from joint research projects to exhibitions, and the reviewers, the DFG's committees and the Head Office will all be involved in the process.

[\[Also at the European and International Levels\]](#)

Now, Ladies and Gentlemen, there is one last point that I consider essential when it comes to strengthening universities: the ongoing Europeanisation and internationalisation of the DFG's funding activities.

After all, the search for knowledge in research has always transcended national boundaries. As science becomes increasingly networked – in whatever forms of discourse or cooperation – national research funding organisations must pave the way and provide a forum for such cooperation, in which researchers can unfold their full potential.

It is not my intention to sketch out the full spectrum of the DFG's activities in Europe and around the world, though there is a lot happening at the moment. Let's just call to mind the German Centres for Research and Innovation, which are currently being established. The DFG is playing a key role in helping to set up the centre in New Delhi; it is going well, and a considerable number of German universities will be participating.

The same is true of New York, where the centre is jointly led by the German Academic Exchange Service and the DFG. The inauguration will be celebrated on 19 February, with Federal Minister Schavan and State Minister Pieper in attendance.

No, I will restrict myself to two examples of European and international research funding: the lead agency process and a pilot project for multilateral project funding within the group of G8 nations.

For years, the DFG has given special attention to the formation of a European Research Area, by funding diverse collaborations between researchers as well as between national and international research funding organisations.

In the previous year, we compiled our experience, knowledge and ideas on the formation of the European Research Area in a strategy report, which I invite you to read when you get a chance.

[\[Lead Agency\]](#)

Just how nicely things are developing can be seen in the lead agency process, which we have been practicing with our partners in Switzerland and Austria for many years; Luxembourg joined us in 2009.

In this process, an international cooperative project is evaluated by a single funding organisation – the lead agency – in accordance with commonly accepted standards of quality. The partner organisations then recognise the funding decision, which the lead agency has made in consultation with them, and the funding organisations finance the part of the research work that is carried out in their respective country.

The lead agency process is an important building block for a future European Research Grant Union, with which the mobility and cooperation of European researchers can be considerably increased.

This European Grant Union is one of the principal goals of the EUROHORCs, the European Heads of Research Councils. These speak with a common voice and act as a unified body vis-à-vis the Commission and member states to promote the development of the European Research Area from the perspective of the researchers.

And the DFG's strategy report is an important contribution to the developing self-organisation of European science, a development which also benefits and strengthens German universities.

[\[Multilateral Research Funding\]](#)

Can the lead agency example also work outside Europe?

We have already had positive experiences with trilateral collaborations involving China and Russia.

Typically, however, such collaborations quickly meet their limitations, when the formal and administrative differences between the funding organisations become too great. As a result, many promising collaborative projects fail to obtain financing, and not all interdisciplinary concepts can be accommodated by the existing international programmes.

In an effort to improve this situation in the future, the DFG last year proposed an initiative for multilateral research funding to the research and funding organisations of the G8 nations. To date, funding organisations from seven countries have teamed up for this initiative.

In a first pilot phase, lasting three years, roughly seven to ten consortia will be funded through joint calls for proposals. For practical reasons, topic-oriented announcements are planned for this test phase. But we hope to move to a free choice of topic, which is the DFG's preferred approach, during the next phase.

Following a two-step application procedure, the national funding organisations fund the research work carried out in their own countries, just as with the lead agency.

We expect to issue the first call for proposals at the end of this month and are anxious to see what kind of response we will get from researchers in Germany, France, Japan, Canada, Russia, the United Kingdom and the USA.

As is always the case with expeditions into the unknown territories of research funding, we are hoping and counting on the discovery and consolidation of further potential for cooperation. This applies above all to higher education research because – and this is true for many countries – the opportunities available here are much more restricted than for large non-university research institutions.

[\[Internet Relaunch with New Corporate Design\]](#)

Ladies and Gentlemen, many of you will have noticed that six months ago, at the 2009 Annual Meeting, the DFG adopted a new image, or corporate design.

Today – right now, actually – we are taking a second, even more important step: the relaunch of our website.

This internet portal is the primary source of information about the DFG, particularly for researchers. We have approximately 3,200 visitors every day, 94,000 per month, and almost 1.2 million a year. These guests visit the site about 1.6 million times a year, and about one-quarter of them are based abroad.

What can they find there? Everything there is to know about the DFG, on roughly 5,000 editorial pages, 20,000 database pages and in 1,500 documents that users can download to their computers. And what document is called up the most? With over 4,500 downloads per month, it is our “Guidelines for Research Grant Proposals”, the DFG's most important information sheet for submitting individual proposals to the DFG. This shows, once again, what an important role individual grants programmes play.

The access options on our website have been reduced to a few main menus and have been made even more prominent by the new corporate design. The content pages have been streamlined and rearranged. Moreover, the new magazine area places greater emphasis on reports concerning DFG-funded research and science policy topics.

I would like to invite you to try the new internet portal for yourself this evening at a stand in the foyer. There you can get more firsthand information from the relaunch project team. I would also like to thank the team, represented by Markus Jagsch, Cornelia Pretzer and Tim Wübben.

[Thanks to All]

Finally, I to come to the part that lies closest to my heart: to thank you, dear friends of the DFG, for your role in contributing to the DFG's success over the past year.

I would like to begin with our donors, especially those in the federal states and in the federal government, who have accompanied and financed our work with diligence, generosity and trust. The same applies to our private benefactors, who are represented primarily by the Donors' Association for the Promotion of Science and Humanities.

Next, I would like to acknowledge those who have helped ensure that the DFG can function as the self-governing organisation of German science.

These include the member institutions – higher education institutions and research organisations – and their administrations. You offer us, your DFG, and our proposals constructive support and are always open for even the most challenging innovations – such as research-oriented standards on gender equality.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the numerous researchers who volunteer their efforts to the DFG and thereby ensure that this self-organisation can function: the 356 members of the DFG statutory bodies, in the Senate, the Joint Committee, the Grants Committees, the Senate Committees, and the 596 review board members.

I would like to recognise the 10,400 reviewers who, in 2009, placed their time and their expertise at the service of the self-governance of science. Their work was equally as voluntary as that of our committee members. No price can be put on such dedication, and we sincerely thank you.

I would also like to acknowledge the 14,300 applicants we had during this past year. At the end of the day, they are the ones who ensure that DFG-funded research retains such a high standard of quality.

I would also like to give special thanks to all of the Alliance Organisations, who are reliable and indispensable partners. My colleague, Hans-Jörg Bullinger, President of the Fraunhofer Society, has just assumed responsibility for the Alliance and I wish him success in his new position.

Any finally, I would like to thank the staff of the DFG Head Office: our General Secretary Dorothee Dzwonnek, the three department heads, Beate Konze-Thomas, Harald von Kalm and Robert Paul Königs, as well as the division heads and all employees. What would the DFG be without your intelligence, your experience and your knowledge, or without your passionate commitment and readiness to serve science?

I would also like to express my gratitude to Marina Koch-Krumrei and our Berlin staff, as well as to everyone who has contributed to the success of this enjoyable evening, especially our three musicians: drummer Felix Schlarmann, who lives in Amsterdam, the double-bass player Marcel Kroemker from Berlin and the pianist Henning Grambow, also from Berlin. All three of them studied at the conservatory in Amsterdam.

[Conclusion]

Finally, thank you, my honoured guests, for coming this evening. We invite you to stay for the reception and look forward to working together with you in the future.

I wish you all the best for 2010!