



# **Speech of the President of the DFG**

at the DFG New Year's Reception

Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and the Humanities, Berlin

Monday, 17 January 2011

Ministers and Senators,  
Undersecretaries of State,  
Members of the Bundestag,  
Excellencies and Esteemed Members of the Diplomatic Corps,  
Presidents and Chancellors,  
Members of the Scientific and Academic Community,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my great pleasure to welcome you all to the New Year's Reception of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft and to ring in the new year with you once again.

Please allow me to first extend a special welcome to our international guests: Your presence here this evening is enriching and reflects the true internationality of research cooperation. Thank you for coming.

I wish you good health and a very productive and rewarding 2011. May this year be inspiring for both your individual creativity and your joint endeavours. I also hope that you've had a great holiday season and were able to celebrate the arrival of the new year full of confidence and anticipation, but also with leisure.

Leisure and quietude are two words that have been on my mind quite a bit these last few weeks. When we strive to identify what ideal conditions research needs to develop optimally; when we then investigate whether our initiatives produce the desired outcomes and whether our existing programmes are a good fit for science, for the specific people involved and for their particular methods — when we do all that, something can get lost in the shuffle. And that is the realisation that the research community, just like any other organism, needs quiet times to be able to develop.

Some things wouldn't even exist without a certain period of maturation: the glass of wine you're having this evening, for example — which I hope you're enjoying.

This is something that we've already suspected in the midst of our everyday hustle and bustle. And brain research backs us up here: Leisure has become a rare good in this day and age, and yet it's essential for creativity and development.

This is not exactly a new insight. Each period, each culture has created its own forms and structures to make room for thought. Consider the monasteries of the Middle Ages: centres of education and knowledge, where life was led in reflection and contemplation.

But what is new is the notion that we can integrate these important periods of quiet time and concentration into our contemporary daily life. This happens to be the topic of a new book called *Idleness: The Joy of Leisure* by Ulrich Schnabel, from which the periodical *Die Zeit* in early December published an abbreviated excerpt entitled *Of Thoughtful Idleness*. Many of you have probably read it, and if you're like me, the message struck a chord.

Because this article talks about our information society, about our compulsive need to be constantly available, our desire to want information faster and faster without necessarily being able to process it. This rapid tempo also prevents us from taking periods of balancing quiet time and from indulging in the mental productivity they enable.

The article contains the following quote from brain researcher Ernst Pöppel: "If everybody in Germany stopped communicating for an hour a day, we would get the largest burst of innovation and creativity you can imagine."

This is a far-reaching and interesting thought experiment which would need to be proven. But then again, we may not have to go to such extremes. After all, we're already seeing a new dynamism and verve in science and research. Besides, a decent amount of communication does in fact produce new ideas and inspire us to break old mental habits. And we can't force periods of creative leisure anyway — we can only allow them.

If this is true for individuals, it can't be wrong for the research community, which, after all, consists of individuals who use their minds and their inventiveness to an extraordinary degree. And so I will take the liberty of applying these insights to the research community at large.

This is what I've been thinking: It is important to allow for regular periods of quiet time in research — and to actively make the case for them, if necessary. This also means that we respond with calmness and composure to the all-too-prevalent rush and restlessness, and also to any calls for more application orientation. Even, and especially, the highly active research community needs room for concentration and productivity. Researchers, with their intrinsic curiosity and characteristic thirst for knowledge, are usually their own best motivators.

Isn't this something we all know from self-observation? Haven't we heard many stories about scientists who get their best ideas when they seem to be doing nothing in particular, or are doing something unrelated? Or how individuals jump out of bed in the middle of the night to capture a sudden idea?

The word "leisure", which I've been using, may sound a bit quaint in this context. Nowadays we tend to associate it with complacency or inactivity. But originally, "leisure" meant the "opportunity to do something".

This kind of opportunity is what I want for the research community. And to make it happen, I propose that we all do our part — or refrain from doing our part, as the case may be. Because patience and quiet times go hand in hand with development and growth. Ever new initiatives, novel forms of cooperation, or additional differentiations in higher education may not necessarily benefit science and academia, and may even prevent the steady and persistent implementation of the changes we have helped initiate. And that would be a shame. Because the changes that have started to happen — for example with the Excellence Initiative, its graduate schools, clusters of excellence and institutional strategies — have been significant and promising. The year 2011, with its first preliminary decisions in the second phase of the Excellence Initiative, will bring ample opportunities to preserve, deepen and continue these changes.

Allow me to refresh your memory: Last autumn we received 227 draft proposals from a total of 65 universities across Germany for the second phase of the programme. And that's just counting first-time proposals, among which the major scientific disciplines were equally represented — the life, natural and engineering sciences as well as the humanities and social sciences. Add to that the renewal proposals of, presumably, all the projects and institutions funded in the first phase of the Excellence Initiative. The Excellence Initiative thus highlights once again a characteristic of science and research that never ceases to impress and fascinate me: the enormous range of topics, approaches and ideas. The broad spectrum represented in the three funding lines of the Excellence Initiative mirrors the diversity of research in general.

Diversity is a natural feature of science and academia, and as such we tend to take it for granted to the extent that we may not even notice it — especially at the DFG, where it is part of our everyday business, features in our daily interactions with researchers, is reflected in the composition of our committees as well as the discussions that take place there, and can be seen in our magazine *forschung*, the latest issue of which I would like to take this opportunity to recommend to you.

Along the same lines, the four women and six men who will be honoured on 16 March, right here at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and the Humanities, with the Leibniz Prize, Germany's most highly endowed research award, are a testament to the diversity of top-level research in our country — their specialties being Egyptology, computer science, experimental solid-state physics, organic geochemistry, quantum optics, microbiology, cell biology, cognitive neuroscience, laser medicine, and technical thermodynamics.

Another example: Biodiversity is a hot research topic right now that unites an impressive range of scientific disciplines including the life, natural, engineering and social sciences, as well as the humanities, to help us better understand, and consequently protect, the natural foundations of life. The DFG announced a call for proposals last autumn for a Research Centre on Integrative Biodiversity Research. An in-depth discussion process initiated by the scientific community had identified biodiversity research as an important research desideratum in Germany. Beginning in 2012, in what will be the seventh DFG Research Centre, scientists from a variety of subject areas will investigate the diversity of species, genes and ecosystems — doing what we might call diverse research into the diversity of diversity.

The example of biodiversity research shows clearly that the broad spectrum of subject areas and disciplines is only the most obvious type of diversity in research. There is also the diversity of the people who do the research. Consider the age range of the scientists and scholars who have submitted proposals to the DFG in recent years — it begins at age 23 and extends to age 93.

Among us today are four young scientists who succeeded in last year's *Jugend forscht* competition. They were honoured with the newly endowed DFG Europe Award: Simon Schuldt in the field of engineering, Luca Banszerus and Michael Schmitz in physics and Andreas Lang in mathematics/ computer sciences. With our support they then participated in the European Union Contest for Young Scientists (EUCYS), where they also placed in the upper ranks. Congratulations and welcome!

The diversity of subject areas and topics multiplied by the diversity of personalities equals the queries, methods and ideas of science. And at least at this level, the diversity of research is inexhaustible, ever changing, and thus never quite within grasp.

And this is what I believe to be a subtle but important trait that we should honour: The diversity of research comes from the inside — and only based on this understanding are we able and willing to fund and support it. Differentiations, on the other hand, are often prescribed from the outside and thus unable to give all scientific and research-related characteristics their due.

Our bottom-up approach means not just that researchers generate and formulate their own topics and propose them to “their” DFG for funding. It also means that we allow research to forge its own paths in its own time; indeed, that research allows itself to do just that. The DFG has always seen itself as accompanying science, rather than the other way around.

Consequently, the diversity of research has produced within the DFG a diversity of programmes and coordinated measures that bundle the various needs and wants of the research community in a sensible and conceptual fashion.

With its initiatives on major instrumentation, for example, the DFG supports new technologies and methods. We accompany the projects over several years with regular user meetings and evaluations of the funded instrumentation technology. With last year’s major instrumentation initiative, we took a very early look at MR-PET devices before they were even available — sometimes our support takes the form of foresight. Then, in late November, the first clinical test of the combined MR-PET technology began at the University Hospital on the right side of the Isar River in Munich. Additional locations will follow. As usual, we will keep track of the tests and are already anxious to learn the results of the trials with this new combination of magnetic resonance tomography and positron emission tomography.

The eleven new Collaborative Research Centres and the ten new Research Training Groups, whose establishment was decided in our committee meetings in early December, are likewise characterised by diversity. Both funding instruments cover an abundance of topics, and thus prove their suitability for the different branches of science and for topics that include the spontaneous self-organisation of soft matter and the origin of the Milky Way, more efficient propulsion systems for aircraft and the regulation of markets, the development of high-temperature superconductors and psychological development risks in children and adolescents.

How amazing the diversity of research and each individual project can be is something we plan to highlight even more in the new year. Because both issues — the diversity of research and the enhancement of its visibility — are very dear to us, and to me personally — also when it comes to the first prioritisations under the continued Pact for Research and Innovation.

The beginning of 2011 is also the beginning of the second phase of the Pact for Research and Innovation, which guarantees to the DFG and the other major research organisations annual budget increases of five percent for the next five years.

We will use these additional funds to show to our stakeholders, the public, and the scientific community itself, how the money which the DFG — and thus German research — receives from the federal and state governments is used, and what it accomplishes. Even we, who read, review, discuss and decide on proposals, are often curious to track the development of the projects and to learn more about these promising topics and interesting questions.

As you know, German research has grown significantly in international stature, especially in recent years. A current example I would like to mention is that for the first time in the history of German-Indian scientific relations, a cooperation for the joint funding of the social sciences will be launched this coming Friday. On the basis of an agreement, the Bonn Group — which consists of the four European funding organisations ANR, DFG, ESRC and NWO — will partner with the Indian Social Science Research Council to announce a call for research networks. By March at the latest, social scientists from Germany, the Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom will be able to submit proposals jointly with their Indian partners.

National dialogue and networking within Germany enhance our prominence as well. Still, it can't hurt to further improve our visibility and to shine a light at all the exciting projects that are supported by the DFG's individual grants. And if, say, an exhibit of research projects not only generates enthusiasm but also helps individuals discover their calling as researchers, we'll be all the happier for it.

The DFG stands for the overwhelming diversity of research — the diversity of disciplines multiplied by the diversity of topics, people, methods, and programmes. As a necessary counterweight to centralisation and monolithic block building — productive though that may be in other ways — diversity has been and will remain one of the DFG's major strengths. It is a strength on which we can draw; a strength worth every bit of our effort, and — to come full circle — worth a bit of our leisure time as well. Cicero already knew that we are “never less at leisure than when at leisure”. And physicist Herrmann von Helmholtz is said to have been unable to walk without thinking. Leisure is not stagnation. Rather, we may want to think of it as movement — out of one's own desire, through one's own effort, at one's own speed.

As every year, many people have earned our thanks today for their tireless efforts and their unconditional commitment: the friends of the DFG; our financial backers at the federal and state levels, the private donors and the Stifterverband für die deutsche Wissenschaft; the members of the DFG; the researchers who serve on our committees, who review proposals and who submit them; our partners in the Alliance and all over the world; and our staff at the Head Office. But this time, I've decided to save the traditional words of thanks for my personal encounters and conversations with you following this address.

So now I would like to invite you to linger here and there, to mingle and talk and reflect together, to share your plans for 2011 — and perhaps even some new ideas that may have been sparked spontaneously.

And as you do that you'll probably meet Ms. Ina Sauer, or maybe you've met her already. Ms. Sauer is the new head of our Berlin Office, and in this new role I would like to introduce and warmly recommend her to you. I trust that you'll find working with her just as gratifying as you found working with her predecessor Ms. Koch-Krumrei.

In this spirit, I would like to invite you now to mingle at your leisure. I wish you an enjoyable and enriching evening.