
Welcome Remarks at the Conference on ‘University Governance: Impeding or Facilitating Creativity?’

Herrenhausen Palace, Hanover, Germany. 29–30 September 2016

WILHELM KRULL

VolkswagenStiftung, Kastanienallee 35, 30519 Hannover, Germany.

Email: Krull@VolkswagenStiftung.de

Dear Professor De Corte,
Dear Professor Krücken,
Distinguished Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, let me extend a very warm welcome to all of you to the conference ‘University Governance: Impeding or Facilitating Creativity?’. I am delighted to see so many guests here at Herrenhausen Palace. I am especially honoured to welcome our distinguished speakers, most particularly the keynote speakers and chairs. This conference was organized in cooperation with the HERCuIES Group of the Academia Europaea, the International Centre for Higher Education Research in Kassel and the Volkswagen Foundation. In particular, I would like to thank the members of the organizing committee, Erik De Corte, Lars Engwall and Georg Krücken and the Executive Secretary of the Academia Europaea, David Coates, as well as Katja Ebeling and her colleagues from the Volkswagen Foundation’s event department. Your advice, your networks, and your relentless support have been very much appreciated. Thank you very much to all of you for your fantastic help.

Before I come to making a few remarks on the rationale of this conference, I would like to briefly address two things:

- (1) the Volkswagen Foundation, and its connection with the Company, as well as
- (2) the place we are in.

As there is currently (September 2016) much talk about the ‘Diesel Affair’ of the Volkswagen Company in the media, I consider it useful to introduce the Foundation

to you, very briefly. The Volkswagen Foundation, which aims to support higher education and research, was established some 55 years ago by the Federal Republic of Germany and the State of Lower Saxony. The Foundation is, thus, contrary to what one might come to think when hearing its name, not subordinated to the car manufacturer of the same name. Luckily, the Volkswagen Foundation has its own fortune. Its assets under management currently amount to €3.5 billion, which secures the funding for its various funding initiatives, even if the Volkswagen car company seems to be in serious trouble. The latter, however, will, at least for 2016, affect our Priority Area for Lower Saxony, which rests to a large extent on the dividends paid on some 30 million shares to which the Foundation is also entitled.

Herrenhausen Palace, where we have gathered, was rebuilt in its former splendour true to the neoclassical design from 1820 of Georg Ludwig Laves, an architect who has shaped Hanover's features to quite some extent (including the Opera House, and the Palace that hosts the State Parliament of Lower Saxony). The Volkswagen Foundation initiated and—through one of its real estate holdings—financed the rebuilding of the Palace, which was destroyed during an allied air raid in October 1943. For the Foundation, it was an investment in a twofold sense: on the one hand, we consider it a sustainable financial investment, which provides us with additional funds for research. On the other, we will use the conference centre in the palace to advance scientific and scholarly exchange as well as public engagement in research and research policy issues—just like today.

Although I have written extensively on the strengths and weaknesses of university governance and its relevance for establishing a high trust culture of creativity (e.g. in the *Handbook on University Governance*), I will restrict myself on this occasion to a few remarks that might be helpful to set the scene.

During the last 30 years, European—and in particular German—universities underwent significant changes concerning their governance and management structures. These changes can be highlighted with the slogan 'From government to governance'. Many attempts were made to provide universities with more autonomy and responsibility for their own affairs. One of the incentives for this development in the 1990s was a series of initiatives by the Volkswagen Foundation and the 'Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft'. Ours was called 'Leistungsfähigkeit durch Eigenverantwortung'—'Efficiency through Autonomy'. The idea behind this initiative was that a substantial shift towards more autonomy and responsibility—such as selecting and hiring staff, recruiting students, and managing the budget—would lead to more effective and even better universities.

The initial idea of providing the universities with more freedom of action and more autonomy by reducing governmental control was accompanied by the installation of all kinds of evaluations, rankings, ratings and mechanisms for efficiency measurement. In many cases, governmental control was translated into a contractual framework of management by narrowly defined objectives. Autonomy came with the condition that the respective university meets specific targets, which very often were closely linked to the allocation of basic funding from the government. Nowadays, evaluations, rankings, ratings and efficiency measures seem to dominate academic life at almost all universities. What was originally meant as a step towards more freedom

and autonomy has subjected academic life to a system of key performance indicators, tight control, and excessive evaluation. In many cases it is obvious that this development has gone much too far. If the short-cycled preparation for the next evaluation dominates a scholar's activities it is no wonder that she or he is less likely to take risks, develop new and unconventional research approaches, and then make use of her or his creativity. It seems that, in this respect, efficient university management has fallen victim to its own success. Nowadays, we are more or less trapped in contractual frameworks that call for antsiness and short-term results.

Finding the right balance between necessary and useful evaluations in order to improve academic performance on the one hand and time and freedom for intellectual creativity on the other, is a great challenge for successful future university governance. What seems to be important to me is a distinction that was made by Jürgen Mittelstraß—a former president of *Academia Europaea*—in a recent newspaper article,¹ namely the distinction between outer and inner university autonomy. Outer university autonomy is the political autonomy, the university's independence from political control. What is even more important, however, is, following Mittelstraß, the university's inner autonomy, i.e. its potential to change and to react to the ubiquitous changes in the development of knowledge. Inner autonomy, thus, is a structural autonomy that enables the university to invent new topics and subjects as well as to abolish those that are no longer necessary. Furthermore, inner autonomy means matching disciplines, finding ways of interdisciplinary collaboration, and developing new curricula. In essence, this is what makes a university a creative institution. This very inner autonomy is also important for finding the right role of the university in its rapidly changing environment. Universities are at the same time international and global players as well as regional partners for the society and economy of their respective countries. If they want to become visible for what they do, at the regional, national, and international level, they have to develop particular strengths and a profile by which they can be identified worldwide. And this, of course, is not an easy task—as Mittelstraß puts it: 'Sometimes, university has to hurt'. I do not know if the concepts for university governance you will discuss during the following two days, once implemented, will turn out to be painful or not, but I do hope that in your debates you will identify those which are best suited to facilitate—and not to impede—establishing a culture of creativity.

Trying to achieve and maintain such a culture of creativity is also not at all straightforward, but rather a process full of paradoxes and contradictions. Whilst every institution, not least for securing its own survival, has to insist that its members comply with its rules, ethical and quality standards, and so on, the creation of new ideas ultimately is about seeing things differently, about breaking the rules, and about being tolerant for errors made. Epistemologically speaking, radically new ideas often cannot be phrased in terms of the initial question, and it is impossible to plan the precise moment at which a major scientific discovery occurs. When we talk about truly ground-breaking, transformative research, we should keep the words of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein in mind: 'Sometimes we do not know what we are looking for, until we finally have found it.'

In almost all of Europe we currently too often pursue a ‘we don’t trust you, we know better, and we want results now’ kind of approach, which extinguishes small flames of creativity, and certainly prevents them from turning into strong fires of transformative research and scientific innovation.

Applying for grants under the current funding regime means operating a machinery of writing proposals and reports instead of writing books or articles, presenting well-tested results instead of getting new ones, thinking in short intervals, i.e. in terms of two- to three-year projects, instead of thinking long-term. Often researchers are discouraged from thinking in terms of complex and possibly time-consuming endeavours. Instead, they are confronted with obsessive bureaucracy, agenda-setting and, in some cases, also the deficiencies of a peer review process that exchanges rigor for relevance. As numerous examples in the history of research tell us, truly transformative research seems to be, by definition, beyond peer review. For universities as well as funding agencies the question is whether we can ultimately encourage reviewers to be prepared to give innovative, high risk projects the benefit of the doubt—and whether the leadership of the university and the respective funding agency in the end are prepared to back the one reviewer who, in opposition to the majority of his colleagues, considers an idea to be brilliant and wholeheartedly supports the proposal. In the current climate in which low trust regimes prevail, it is very doubtful, and the question arises: to what extent are we prepared to take risks beyond the usual routine imposing ever more evaluations and assessments?

In an increasingly complex and complicated world, the need to constantly adapt to a rapidly changing environment is widely felt. Trying to optimize one’s position in an ever-more differentiated and diversified landscape of higher education and research institutions puts a lot of stress on universities and research organizations alike. In many cases, a clear vision of the institution’s strategic objectives is missing, and this in turn leads to a high degree of uncertainty about which route to take.

The ability to rise above the quite heterogeneous details and to see the wider lay of the land is a prerequisite for successfully driving institutional integration and thus tying up the many loose ends. However, in view of the enormous complexity and the lack of coherence in our times of great uncertainty, and of the danger to make gross mistakes, there is an increasing tendency not to act at all, or to stick to old assumptions and patterns of behaviour that lead to the creation of multitudinous committees, dispersed responsibilities, and several new hierarchies. This in turn leads to exactly the opposite of what is required in today’s world: a university that enables its members to realize their aspirations and that provides the next generation with an organizational set-up that is capable of rejuvenating itself with each new challenge it faces. In short: a self-learning organization.

2016 is the year to commemorate the birth, 370 years ago, and the death, 300 years ago, of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. From what we know about Leibniz, who spent almost 40 years of his life in Herrenhausen, Herrenhausen Palace and its beautiful Gardens had a very productive influence on Leibniz’s scholarly creativity. For him, they were a source of inspiration and served as facilitators for the development of new

ideas. He once said: ‘On awaking I already had so many ideas that the day was not long enough to write them all down.’

I hope that this, too, will be the case when you wake up tomorrow morning—and that the Palace and the Gardens of Herrenhausen will inspire your deliberations about the best forms of governance for academic creativity.

I wish you a lot of new ideas and the best of success.

Reference

1. J. Mittelstraß (2016) Die Universität zwischen Weisheit und Management. FAZ, 31 August 2016, p. N4.

About the Author

Dr **Wilhelm Krull** has, since 1996, been running the Volkswagen Foundation—following his studies in German, philosophy, education and politics, an appointment as a DAAD lecturer at the University of Oxford, and leading positions at the Wissenschaftsrat (German Science Council) and at the headquarters of the Max-Planck-Gesellschaft (Max Planck Society). As well as his professional activities in science policy and in the promotion and funding of research, he was and still is a member of numerous national, foreign and international committees.