

**Inaugural speech by Jutta Günther
as President of the University of Bremen on September 6, 2022¹**

Dear Mayor,
Dear Senator,
Dear Students and Employees of the University of Bremen,
Dear Guests!

I am glad to welcome so many of you this evening!

I would like to express my sincere thanks. I would like to thank the Mayor and the Senator for Science as well as the entire Bremen Senate for the trust they have placed in me as the new President.

And I thank the members of the Academic Senate who elected me on March 2, expressing their confidence in me.

I have been in office for a few days, and I would like to recall again what I committed myself to on March 2, 2022 after my election in the Academic Senate. My expressed wish as president is to represent all members of this university and to work with all my might for the interests of all areas of our university.

An inauguration is always a transition. As a new president, I am glad that our university is characterized by a lively history, so I do not have to start from scratch. So far, six presidents have headed the University of Bremen and made it what it is today.

I would like to thank my predecessor, Bernd Scholz-Reiter. Bernd, you have intensively dedicated yourself to the service of the university over the past ten years. Strong research, strategic networking, the U Bremen Research Alliance, the vision of a European university through YUFE: all this and much more will always be associated with your term in office.

I would like to thank Eva-Maria Feichtner and Thomas Hoffmeister, who in recent years have served as Vice President Diversity and International and as Vice President Academics. They have been tirelessly involved in the University Executive Board, which was a big challenge during the pandemic.

The spoken word is binding.

I would like to thank Martin Mehrstens and Frauke Meyer for their efforts in university finance and administration, an area that demands making the completely impossible possible time and time again.

As Vice President, I was able to work with you in the University Executive Board for over two years, which was an incredible experience and a very good time.

Now I am responsible for the entire university. I would like to see a continuation of the great cooperation in the years ahead with the Academic Senate, with the faculties and administrative units of the University, with the Senator's Office for Science and Ports, the universities in Bremen State, the non-university institutes, the cooperation partners in business, culture, and the community, and our many partner institutions around the world. By this, I mean that we listen carefully to each other, communicate well with each other, and use our combined strength to promote Bremen and Bremerhaven as a center of science.

Before I get to the main part of my speech, I would like to welcome one person in particular, my colleague Igor Yegorov from Kiev. Igor, you took the train and traveled for almost two days to be with us in Bremen. We all feel so honored to have you here with us in these difficult times. Thanks a lot for being here.

I would now like to talk about what the university means to me, what my priorities will be as president, and what I have in mind for the future of the University of Bremen.

University – this has always been one of the most fascinating places for me. The first time I entered a university was in Tübingen. I visited a friend who studied theology there and went to a lecture with her. I did not understand much, but I was excited about this place of knowledge, learning, and research. I became a student myself several years later, and science has not let go of me.

University, for me, is the very first address for knowledge. Recently, a colleague in the mission statement working group summed it up very well. She said, “People strive for knowledge – simply for the sake of knowledge, that is in our nature as human beings.” I agree with my colleague and I would like our university to create space for this very purpose – for this quest for knowledge.

Science needs academic freedom. It is the foundation on which we all stand. The University of Bremen has a clear stance on this. Last year, during our 50th anniversary celebrations, there was a large red banner on the tallest building on our campus. It said:

Independent
Teaching,
Independent
Research,
Independent
Minds
... Open since 1971.

Every morning when I came to university, I was delighted and reminded again and again of what a great achievement academic freedom is.

Academic freedom is neither a given nor is it self-perpetuating. And it is by no means a reality everywhere in the world. On the contrary; in many countries, it does not exist or it is at risk.

The Academic Freedom Index – a German-Swedish research project – shows that around 80% of the world’s population lives in countries where freedom of science is restricted. There is currently a sad parallel between the global tendency towards autocracy and the decline in scientific freedom.

We cannot afford to be indifferent to this, because the University of Bremen’s networks extend worldwide, and the pursuit of scientific knowledge knows no national borders.

We are privileged by the constitutional protection of academic freedom and by the material possibilities that we have in Germany and Europe.

Even where we see academic freedom and democracy in place, it is important to safeguard them. The best structures of democratically free organizations are of no use if people succumb to the temptation of manipulation, deception, or abuse of power.

Democracy and academic freedom are just as sacred to me as president as a culture of scientific integrity. There must never be a freedom to discriminate!

Academic freedom is not a one-way street. It does not absolve us of responsibility! As academics, we are responsible for what we know and teach. We are also responsible for what we do not know, and would therefore be well advised to not behave as if we already know everything.

I speak of individual freedom and responsibility. How does this relate to the university and a strong community? Does this not also require that individuals relate to each other and connect to promote a synergetic outcome? My answer to this question is a resounding yes.

Since its foundation, the university has acknowledged this societal responsibility. How could this possibly be achieved if everyone just did “their own thing?!”

I am convinced that the individual drive for research and knowledge and a collective communication of collaborative goals in societal responsibility are not mutually exclusive, but complement each other perfectly. Illustrative of this, I think of an orchestra, in which many brilliant individual talents join together and through combining their roles create great musical experiences.

Collective achievements such as this require that individual talents sometimes take a step back. Not to be slowed down, but so that other talents can be seen and integrated. This starts on a small scale with students’ group assignments, publications, research alliances, and continues with faculties and extends to encompass the entire university.

It is correct that obtaining knowledge also requires a retreat into one's self. And different areas of specialization have differing work methods. A fair competition for knowledge is part of this. However, as the president, I wish for a university which is not dominated by separation and egotism, but by integration and integrity; only this is in my eyes truly SUSTAINABLE.

Sustainability is a foundational way of behaving. It refers not just to the relationship between people and nature, but also to interpersonal relationships.

Social, ecological, and economic sustainability – the three dimensions we differentiate are in practice very interconnected. Erik Dietzenbacher, whom I thank very much for his speech, showed very well that we on Earth are closely connected with each other and that our life in Europe has massive implications for life in other parts of the world.

We live in a planet in times of crisis, but the University of Bremen does not remain inactive. In April, the Academic Senate made a groundbreaking decision, which impressed me a lot. I quote from their consensus:

“Sustainability is the fundamental guiding principle of the University of Bremen.

In view of the climate crisis, the extinction of species, and other crises threatening the existence of the world, the global sustainability goals and climate justice are central concerns of the university.

The university acknowledges its responsibility for the necessary global social-ecological transformation and for justice towards present and future generations.”

This basic consensus, ladies and gentlemen, did not fall from the sky like manna, but – as is the case for all university policy – was preceded by an energetic and multifaceted discussion. In this context, I would like to recall several events that led us to this: a meeting in December 2019 in the Academic Senate on the topic followed by the subsequent closed meeting of the Academic Senate with broad participation, the paper on the “Climate University” initiated by the Senator for Science, the urgent position of a group of deans to finally become active with the university in this area, an online signature campaign from within the university,

a paper with food for thought about our sustainability research institute artec, and much more.

I stand with the university for its sustainability mission statement and the goals set for climate justice and climate neutrality.

Our university is a place of excellent research and education. It can and will deliver results to solve the pressing issues of our time. A practical approach has always been deeply anchored in the DNA of the University of Bremen. To succeed, we need natural sciences just as we need social and educational sciences. We need humanities, cultural, and political sciences just as much as technical sciences and mathematics. We need well-trained teachers and lawyers. We hope to develop new solutions, new techniques, technologies, software, social innovations, and so much more in the midst of a time of epochal societal and cultural changes.

I need the ENTIRE university, all subject areas and status groups, and I especially need your willingness to listen to each other, to reflect, and to see ourselves as a strong community.

Let me conclude.

So many have congratulated me on my appointment and assumption of office. Many have mentioned the great challenges of this difficult time – the pandemic, the war in Europe, the climate crisis, the energy crisis, the polarization of society.

I would not be a good president, if I were to wait for simpler times and more comfortable conditions. There are no ideal circumstances, so it is necessary to try to make the best choices and do the best within whatever circumstances surround us.

I am glad to stand at the head of our university, even if there is the perception that being in a leadership position is often quite lonely. I have never understood these views and therefore never believed this prognosis.

How can it be lonely, when there are so many great people directly at my side!? I would like to ask my team of the University Executive Board to join me in the front here:

Frauke Meyer, our Director of Finance and Administration;

Mandy Boehnke, Vice President for International Affairs, Academic Qualification, and Diversity;

Maren Petersen, Vice President for Teaching and Studies; and

Michal Kucera, Vice President for Research and Transfer, who is participating online from a marine science expedition in the North Atlantic.

The University of Bremen, ladies and gentlemen, is not Jutta Günther or the University Executive Board. This university includes all of us: students, university lecturers, and employees of all areas.

I would like to thank the University of Bremen's Center for Performance Studies for their wonderful contribution to tonight's event.

Further, I would like to give a special thank you to two colleagues: Julia Pundt and Rebecca Grotheer, who had a decisive role in overseeing the organization of this evening.

I would also like to thank the Studierendenwerk (Student Services Organisation), for accommodating us all here in the Mensa cafeteria tonight.

I wish you all a wonderful evening in good company.