

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

Dear Mr. Mayor,
dear Senator,
dear Students and Members of the University of Bremen,
dear Guests,

I am delighted that so many of you are here this evening.

First of all, I would like to thank you all most sincerely. I would like to thank the Mayor and the Senator for Science and Ports, as well as the entire Bremen Senate for the trust they have placed in me as the new President. And I would like to thank the members of the Academic Senate who elected me on March 2 and have put their confidence in me.

I have been in office for a few days now, and I would like to remind you once again of what I pledged to do on March 2, 2022, following my election at the Academic Senate: I would like to be the President of all members involved at this university and will do my utmost to support the interests of all areas at our university.

An inauguration is always a period of transition. As the new President, I won't be beginning from nothing, since our university has been shaped by a vibrant history. To date, six presidents have occupied the top position at the University of Bremen and made it what it is today.

I would like to thank my predecessor, Bernd Scholz-Reiter. Bernd, over the past ten years, you have served the university with enthusiastic commitment. Excellence in research and strategic networking, the U Bremen Research Alliance, a vision of a European University through YUFE – all these achievements and many more will be associated with your time in office.

¹ The spoken text will prevail in the event of differences.

I would like to thank Eva-Maria Feichtner and Thomas Hoffmeister, who have worked tirelessly on the University Executive Board in recent years as Vice President International and Diversity and as Vice President for Teaching and Studies. It was a major challenge during the pandemic.

I would like to thank Martin Mehrtens and Frauke Meyer for their efforts in Administration and Finance, a department which time and again makes the impossible possible.

As Vice President, I had the pleasure of working with you in the University Executive Board for over two years, a time which was full of experiences that I look back on very fondly.

Now, I'm responsible for the entire university. In the years ahead, I look forward to maintaining a positive working relationship with the Academic Senate, the university's faculties and administrative units, the Senatorial Administration for Science and Ports, the state's universities, nonuniversity research institutions, our cooperation partners in business, culture, and society, and our many partner institutions all over the world. By this, I mean that we need to listen carefully to each other, so that we can facilitate effective communication with one another and make every effort to advance Bremen and Bremerhaven as a location for academia and science.

Before I move on to the main part of my speech, I would like to extend a welcome to one person in particular: my colleague Igor Yegorov from Kyiv. Igor, you took the train and traveled for almost two days to be with us in Bremen. It is such a big honor for all of us to have you in most difficult times. Thanks a lot for being here.

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

University has always been one of the most fascinating places for me. The first time I set foot in a university was in Tübingen. I visited a friend who was studying theology there and went to a lecture with her. Though I didn't understand much, I was excited by this place of knowledge, learning, and research. It wasn't until

much later that I became a student myself, and the world of academia has never let me go.

University, for me, is the very first port of call for knowledge. Recently, a colleague in the mission statement working group really hit the nail on the head when she said: “People strive for knowledge – simply for the sake of knowledge; that’s in our nature as people.” I agree with my colleague, and I want our university to provide the freedom to do just that – to strive for knowledge.

Academia 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 read:

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

It pleased me to see that every morning when I came to university and reminded me time and again what a great achievement academic freedom is.

Academic freedom is neither a matter of course nor self-sustaining. And it is by no means the reality everywhere in the world. Quite the contrary: In many countries, it doesn’t exist or it is endangered.

The Academic Freedom Index, a German-Swedish research project, shows that around 80% of the world’s population lives in countries where academic freedom is restricted. There is currently a distressing parallel between the global trend towards autocratization and the decline in academic freedom.

We cannot ignore this – the University of Bremen is part of a global network, and the pursuit for academic knowledge knows no national boundaries. We are in a privileged position thanks to academic freedom being protected under the constitution and the resources that we have in Germany and Europe.

But even in places where academic freedom and democracy are the reality, it is important to protect these concepts. The best structures of democratic and

free organizations are of no use if people succumb to the temptation of manipulation, lack of transparency, or abuse of power.

As President, democracy and academic freedom are just as sacred to me as a culture of academic integrity. There must never be 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. And we are also responsible for what we don't know and are therefore well advised not to come across as all-knowing to others.

I am talking here about individual freedom and responsibility. But what about the university as a strong community? Isn't there also a need for individuals to relate to each other? Connections to bring about the oft-quoted synergy effects? My answer to that question is quite clear: yes.

Since its founding, the university has been committed to social responsibility. And how can we live up to this aspiration when everyone is doing their "own thing" in this regard?

It is my firm belief that, on the one hand, an individual spirit of research coupled with the pursuit of knowledge and, on the other, a collective understanding of shared goals of social responsibility are by no means mutually exclusive, but rather complement each other wonderfully. The image I have in mind is that of an orchestra in which many brilliant individual talents can only create great musical experiences when they interact with each other.

To achieve this, we need to be willing to let our own talent take a step back sometimes. That doesn't mean holding ourselves back, rather it's about recognizing and integrating the talent of others. This begins with joint student papers, publications, research associations, and keeps on going with the faculties all the way to the entire university.

It is true that knowledge also needs us to seek solitude. And subject cultures already have vastly different ways of working. Fair competition for knowledge is

also part of this. But as President, I would like to see a university that is not characterized by isolation and selfishness, but by integration and integrity – because that is the only thing that is really SUSTAINABLE in my opinion.

Sustainability is a fundamental principle for me. It concerns not only the relationship between humans and nature, but also the relationship between humans among each other.

Social, ecological, and economic sustainability – we distinguish between these three dimensions, but they are closely intertwined in practice. Erik Dietzenbacher, whom I would like to thank most sincerely for his presentation, has very clearly shown that we are closely connected on Earth, and that our life in Europe has massive implications for life in other parts of the world.

We live on this planet in times of crisis, but the University of Bremen has not been inactive. In April, the Academic Senate passed a groundbreaking resolution, which impressed me thoroughly. I'll now quote from the resolution:

“Sustainability is the fundamental guiding principle of the university.

With regard to the climate crisis, the extinction of species, and other crises that threaten our existence, the global sustainability goals and climate justice are central issues for the university.

The university is committed to its responsibility for the necessary global socioecological transformation and for the equity of present and future generations.”

This resolution, ladies and gentlemen, was not like manna from heaven. It was preceded by a lively and wide-ranging discussion, as befits a university. I can recall a session in December 2019 at the Academic Senate on this topic, the subsequent Academic Senate retreat conference with wide representation, the paper on the “climate university” launched with the Senator for Science, the urgent statement from a group of deans to finally take action with the university in this area, an online petition from within the university, a paper with plenty of food for thought from our artec Sustainability Research Center, and much more.

Together with the university, I stand for the “sustainability” guiding principle and for the “climate justice” and “climate neutrality” objectives.

Our university is a place of excellent research and excellent teaching. It can and will contribute to solving pressing problems. After all, practical relevance has always been in the DNA of the University of Bremen.

We therefore need the natural sciences, as well as the social and educational sciences. We need the humanities, cultural studies, as well as technical sciences and mathematics. We need well-trained teachers and lawyers. It is about developing new solutions, tools, technologies, software, social innovations, and much more at a time of epoch-defining social and cultural change.

I need the WHOLE University, all subjects and all status groups, and above all I need your willingness to listen to each other, to reflect, and to see us as a strong community.

Let me conclude by saying:

Many people have congratulated me on my election and on taking office. Many have pointed out the great challenges and difficult times ahead: the pandemic, the war in Europe, the climate crisis, the energy crisis, the polarization of society.

But I wouldn't be a good president if I were to wait for times to be easy and conditions to be comfortable. There are no ideal circumstances – we have to try to do the right thing and make the best of what we can, whatever the circumstances may be.

I'm happy to be at the head of our university, even though I hear it's often very lonely in top positions. Yet I have never understood this perspective and therefore never believed that this will be the case.

How could it be lonely when there are such great people right by my side? I would like to ask my team on the University Executive Board to come forward:

Frauke Meyer, our Director of Finance and Administration,

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

Maren Petersen, the Vice President for Teaching and Studies, and

Michal Kucera, the Vice President for Research and Transfer, appearing via an online connection from a marine science expedition in the North Atlantic.

Ladies and gentlemen, the University of Bremen is NOT Jutta Günther or the University Executive Board; the university is ALL of us: students, lecturers, and staff from all areas.

I would like to thank the University of Bremen's Center for Performance Studies for putting on a great show at today's event.

I would also like to thank two of my colleagues in particular: Julia Pundt and Rebecca Grotheer, who played a key role in organizing this evening's event.

And I would like to thank the Studierendenwerk for hosting us all at the cafeteria this evening.

I hope you all have a wonderful evening in good company.