

## New Year's speech by the president of Leibniz University Hannover at the 2025 New Year's reception

Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to give you a warm welcome and wish you a healthy, successful and peaceful new year. The fact that so many of you are here is an impressive indication of your connection to and appreciation for our university. It is a particular honour for me to welcome so many high-ranking representatives from politics, the city community and the cultural sphere alongside the members of our university today.

Dear guests, dear members of Leibniz University Hannover,

We are at the beginning of a new year, which – as we can unfortunately see – has so far not been any less challenging than the previous one. Global crises are impacting our everyday life:

- war in Europe and elsewhere,
- people who have to leave their homes at risk to their lives,
- and a planet that is suffering significantly as a consequence of climate change.

All this bad news is dominating the headlines and weighing on us all. But as depressing as these developments are, they raise a central question for us as a university: How do we deal with these issues? What role do we play as a university in a world characterised by crises?

Some people are calling for universities to increasingly position themselves politically.

But what we have to remember is this: our responsibility is to promote science and academia. Our mission, enshrined in law, is to be a place where teaching, research and discourse can take place freely – independently, objectively and based on evidence.

This in no way means that we close ourselves off to the challenges of the world. On the contrary: we encourage and expect scientists and academics to address the urgent questions of our time. They analyse causes, develop innovative approaches and thereby contribute to solving global problems – all with the requisite scientific excellence.

As a university we also create spaces for discourse. When we do so in a respectful, pluralistic manner based on the liberal democratic order, it is possible to debate even the most difficult topics.

However, what there is no place for at our university is contemptuous and inhuman behaviours and attitudes: anti-Semitism, racism and every form of group-specific discrimination are diametrically opposed to our fundamental values. We are a refuge and a bastion for our liberal democratic order.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Scientific excellence is our core business. It is the anchor we orient ourselves around. It is the foundation we build our future on. Let us work together to continue to establish Leibniz University Hannover as a place of outstanding teaching, research and innovation – as a place whose strength unfolds through science, not politics.

Dear guests, dear members of Leibniz University Hannover,

With this attitude – a clear commitment to science and its role as a forerunner to progress – we are building on the foundations of our university. Our namesake, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, stood like no other for interdisciplinary research and the conviction that knowledge can improve the course of the world.

The past year was a special one for us here at Leibniz University: It was a year of change, development and strategic progress. A year in which we as a university showed that we can respond to global and local challenges

- with scientific excellence,
- strategic vision,
- and the willingness to take responsibility.

A significant milestone was the transition of Leibniz University Hannover to sponsorship by a foundation under public law.

This step has not only changed the framework and conditions for our work but has also opened up entirely new possibilities.

We now have more autonomy:

- More autonomy in recruiting the brightest minds.
- More financial independence, which allows us to plan strategically for the long term.
- The permanent right to plan and implement building projects, which gives us more control over the design and development of our infrastructure.
- And finally, our properties have been transferred to the foundation – forming a basis for us to operate in a financially sustainable and future-oriented way.

But what do these changes mean for us beyond this?

They are not merely about legal and organisational advantages. They are about how we continue to develop our university, how we use these freedoms to make research, teaching and transfer even stronger.

The benchmarks relative to other leading universities show that we are on the right path.

The foundation model has put us in a position to pursue our goals more clearly and decisively. Nevertheless, we are in an increasingly intense competition – both nationally and internationally. This means we cannot let up; we have to stick to our ambitions.

Our strategic planning is our compass for the future. If we implement our processes consistently and use our resources in a targeted way, in 2031 – 200 years after the university was founded – we should be able to state with conviction that Leibniz University Hannover:

- Is among Germany's top universities – with pioneering excellence and innovation in its core scientific areas.
- Is a globally networked player in science and education, with strategic partnerships ranging from regional innovation clusters to global alliances.
- Is a key force for societal and technological transformation which builds bridges between the scientific community, business and society.

These goals have been validated and agreed upon, and we are on the right track. The goals are based on our "LUH 2031" strategy, which sets out ambitious priorities – from the promotion of internationally visible cutting-edge research and the complete digitalisation of our processes and teaching to the targeted intensification of our societal responsibility.

We aim to be more than an excellent university: we aspire to be an institution that opens up new pathways, that shifts the boundaries of knowledge and that is recognised not only in Germany but also internationally.

These goals are a voluntary commitment we have made. Please allow me to list a few examples of our successful progress in this direction:

We are making outstanding achievements in research.

In recent years our researchers have been very successful in obtaining ERC grants, for which there is strong international competition. We currently have 22 ERC grants underway, and there is an upwards trend. This increase impressively demonstrates our strength in the area of fundamental research. These acquisitions not only set benchmarks for our university, they also cement our position among Europe's top-notch research institutions. And they are also proof of our excellent appointments.

Also impressive is the clear increase in third-party funding in recent years.

This success is a key indicator that we as a university are fulfilling our aspiration of scientific excellence and are strongly positioned in the competition for research funding. The gold standard in this area – and therefore the benchmark for scientific quality – is the third-party funding from the German Research Foundation (DFG). The DFG grants funding solely according to the principle of excellence.

A quick glance at the recently published DFG Funding Atlas, however, could give the impression that there is room for LUH to improve here: ranking at place 20 among the German universities, we are in the upper range, but apparently not at the top. However, this diagnosis is only half of the truth and requires a more nuanced look.

1. We are among the best in a large system: There are 426 higher education institutions in Germany, 120 of which are universities. To rank twentieth among them means an excellent position within a highly competitive environment.
2. Our range of subjects is both unique and limited: In contrast to all of the universities ahead of us in the list, we do not have a medicine programme, which traditionally generates an exceptionally high level of third-party funding. In Hannover, as you know, the Hannover Medical School (MHH) and the University of Veterinary Medicine Hannover (TiHo) are independent institutions.

3. Our size sets us apart: The universities that rank higher than us – for example, in Berlin, Munich or Hamburg – often have 500 to 600 professorships. In comparison, LUH has “only” about 350 professorships. Yet we nevertheless achieve results that catapult us to the absolute top of the field for Germany.

A particularly illuminating gauge is therefore the structurally adjusted ranking. This ranking takes into account the size and subject structure of a university. It asks how efficiently and successfully a university uses its resources relative to the number of professorships or academic staff. This is where LUH's true strength becomes evident: in this adjusted ranking, we rank third in all of Germany, behind Freiburg and Konstanz.

This isn't just a number. Rather, it is proof of the exceptional quality of our research and the impressive performance of our researchers. It shows that we use our resources incredibly efficiently and nevertheless achieve scientific excellence at the highest level.

I thank all of the colleagues who have contributed to this outstanding result. It is a success we can all be proud of – and a clear signal that LUH is a place for cutting-edge research and innovation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our university's roots are in the engineering and natural sciences – and these areas are also where our particular strength is emerging today. In the engineering sciences we rank seventh Germany-wide; in the natural sciences we rank twelfth. Particular mention should be given to the discipline of physics, which ranks sixth nationally. Within the field of physics, the area “Optics, quantum optics and physics of atoms, molecules and plasmas” is especially successful. Here we hold the top position in Germany – ahead of renowned locations such as Munich and Hamburg.

Our position in mechanical engineering is similarly impressive: in the field of production engineering we have an excellent second-place ranking, close behind RWTH Aachen. We're among the top performers in other areas too – for example, geophysics and geodetic science. We're the clear number one in Germany here.

But our strengths extend far beyond these classical areas. In the humanities and social sciences, we've succeeded for the first time in joining the top 40 universities in terms of research performance. This is particularly noteworthy, since this area at LUH is focused strongly on teacher training. Through our teacher training, a fifth of our students are being prepared for secondary schools, vocational schools and special needs education, making us the leader in this area in Lower Saxony. And to clearly illustrate the size of the humanities and social sciences at our university: a further fifth of our students are studying law or economics and management.

Another key component of our strategic development is our participation in the Excellence Strategy of the federal and state governments. With the successful Clusters of Excellence Phoenix D, Quantum Frontiers and Hearing4All, we have sustainably strengthened our competitiveness in the international realm. The proposals for the extension of these clusters were submitted in August 2024. Two review processes have already taken place, and the third will follow this month.

The funding decision on 22 May 2025 will determine our future direction: If at least two clusters are extended, we will be able to compete again for University of Excellence status. Intensive preparations for this possibility have already been underway for months. This challenge will shape the coming two years at our university, while simultaneously giving us the chance to further strengthen and expand our scientific excellence.

To close, I would like to talk about the international dimension.

Our engagement in the EULiST European university alliance, which we initiated, shows how cross-border cooperation can succeed. Together with our partner universities, we are actively participating in the transformation of the European higher education landscape and setting standards for sustainable and digital innovations. And we are creating a joint campus with highly appealing locations for our students.

Prof. Dr.-Ing. Regina Nogueira, who took over as Vice President for International Affairs and Sustainability on 1 September 2024, plays a central role here.

Regina, thank you very much for your significant engagement within the Presidential Board for the benefit of the university.

Among other things, Prof. Nogueira focuses on this European university alliance, which was initiated in great part by her predecessor. Above all though, she works to establish our university as an internationally visible university – rooted in Europe and with partners around the globe – that adopts an international approach in all areas. For example, our stated goal for this year is to fill up to 40 visiting professorships with international applicants in order to strengthen internationalisation at the university. We will also significantly expand the number of English-language Master's degree programmes to increase our attractiveness for international students.

But a successful future takes more than just ambitious plans:

It requires commitment, drive and a willingness to take on challenges with determination. Let us work together to continue successfully developing LUH – as a place where knowledge flourishes, innovation thrives and society is supported in moving forward.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The future belongs to those who have the courage to shape it. At Leibniz University Hannover we have this courage. With scientific excellence, strategic skill and a clear focus on the central issues of our time, we will set standards in the coming years as well – for our region, for Europe and for the world.

The key issue of our time is the safeguarding of democracy, the safeguarding of our liberal democratic order and the safeguarding of our democratic ideals and values. The significant rise of nationalism, not just in the USA but also on our doorstep, is putting democracy and the rule of law under strain. The number of autocratically ruled states is increasing steadily, and the ongoing undermining of democracy is leading to authoritarian rule in many states. We cannot allow this! We stand firmly on the foundation of our liberal democratic order. We will resolutely oppose any attempts, no matter how minor, to undermine it.

I thank all of you for your support, your trust and your passion. Let us make 2025 another milestone on our path – in the spirit of progress, cooperation and excellence.

With this in mind, I wish you a successful and healthy new year!

And before I introduce the newly appointed professors, I would like to thank you for listening. I ask for your determination, commitment and willingness to take responsibility. Please stand up vigorously in defence of our democracy, in both large and small ways. The choice is yours!