

CHAPTER 11

Conversation is key — Universities and their responsibility for societal development

Sabine Kunst

INTRODUCTION

In the winter of 1827/28, half of the city of Berlin — from the workers to the members of court society — listened to Alexander von Humboldt’s legendary Cosmos Lectures, which form the nucleus of his great work. At each lecture, hundreds of listeners gained insight into the state of research at the time.

Last April, almost two centuries later, the President of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, alluded to the unique spirit of these lectures, officially opening a new series of Cosmos Lectures at Humboldt-Universität in light of the challenges facing research today:

“I believe that this spirit of the Cosmos Lectures is in fact needed far more today than it was in Humboldt’s day. We are living in a time of great change. We are seeing ever faster and more powerful waves of technological disruption. We are experiencing tough global competition, which has long since ceased being just commercial rivalry, but has become political and systemic competition. Precisely at times like these — notwithstanding all the heated political debates on everything from migration policy to security policy — there is one thing we must not forget: the world’s future, and our future prosperity, depend now more than ever on us working globally as equals, sharing scientific knowledge and viable solutions. If we in

Germany wish to continue to shape the future, rather than just to be driven along, then science and research must be a major priority in society” (Steinmeier, 2019).

Steinmeier’s words make it very clear that academia and research must play a central role in society today. Research should not only ask questions of societal interest, but also enter into an active dialogue with society.

How is this dialogue achieved? And what is the role of a scientist or scholar at Humboldt-Universität today? Does it make a difference whether you pursue your research in the middle of a capital city or in a closed-off community of experts? Do we, like Alexander von Humboldt, want to make our knowledge and the results of our research public? And what are the framework conditions for the research production process and the criteria for success when it comes to transferring knowledge into society today?

Humboldt-Universität is a place where these questions should be asked with particular determination. And they should be answered with excitement and a willingness to experiment. When Wilhelm von Humboldt founded the Berlin University in 1810, his new, ground-breaking idea was to unite the two academic missions of research and teaching. He wanted to provide students with a well-rounded humanistic education at this “*universitas litterarum*”. The concept spread quickly across the globe and resulted in a multitude of new universities being founded.

Two hundred years later, Humboldt-Universität is now expanding upon its founder’s idea, pursuing a third mission that explores the reciprocal dialogue between research, teaching and civil society. There are many terms used to describe or define this mission and its many aspects: public engagement, open science, open access, knowledge exchange, knowledge transfer. What they all have in common is multidirectional communication and exchange, which are essential to the development of modern academia. Conversation is key.

But let me first ask where we stand in 2019 as a German “*universitas litterarum*”? It is our view that rational discourse as an essential characteristic of academia is endangered. It is in light of this that addressing socially relevant topics in research seems a necessary albeit not sufficient condition for universities to make a significant contribution to rational discourse today and thus attain sustainable societal development with a long-term perspective.

Launching its definition of Global Grand Challenges, the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) has made the point that issues such as (global) health, migration, financial (a) symmetry or green growth and sustainable development are, of course, reflected in today’s research. And they have made it very clear that, in order to be profitable, this research should be conducted in exchange with non-academic experts in civil society.

Universities must therefore embark on a new dialogue with civil society, contributing and participating beyond mere academic publications and

exhibitions. This requires appropriate formats that encourage a variety of stakeholders to enter into a dialogue with academia. But this path has to be marked by a thorough analysis of the implications and side effects it could have for academia and for the individual researcher. What incentives, for example, can we offer researchers with regard to their already challenging careers that would encourage them to embark on this path? What concessions are we willing to make to the comprehensibility and applicability of the research results?

I cannot give you a definitive answer to these questions. Instead, I would like to provide you with a concrete example of this dialogue with society. Humboldt-Universität fosters research both on societal issues and on public engagement. A new institution at Humboldt-Universität that exemplifies this is the Humboldt Lab, which is currently under construction and due to be completed by autumn 2019.

THE HUMBOLDT LAB

In the historical centre of Berlin, the Humboldt Forum will form a unique hub for art, culture, research and education with international appeal. In the near future, the rebuilt Berlin Palace, museums, the University and various event spaces will become a meeting place for people from all over the world — regardless of their background, age, education, interests, prior knowledge or preferences. In the Humboldt Forum, new forms of interaction are tested, a variety of cultural and social expressions can be experienced, and scientific and artistic ways of working are brought together. History comes alive in the present day.

The unique collections of the Ethnological Museum (Ethnologisches Museum) and the Asian Art Museum (Museum für Asiatische Kunst) will offer a comprehensive overview of the world's art and cultures spanning the ages as well as the continents. The Berlin Exhibition invites its guests to view its installations, multimedia projections and original objects, and thereby trace the developments and relationships, both past and present, which connect Berlin to the rest of the world. The Humboldt Academy provides educational services and overarching formats, as well as basic introductory programs accompanying and connecting the exhibitions and events. Moreover, it coordinates Humboldt Forum's research projects.

In the Humboldt Lab, Humboldt-Universität will provide research with a stage to render itself more accessible and comprehensible to a broad audience. In this 1000-square-metre Lab, ever-changing exhibitions and events will convey the role of research in everyday life. The Humboldt Forum is all about research approaches and cognitions, i.e. the methodological dimension

of the emergence of new knowledge. Conversely, the University wants to show how academic work is conducted in various specialist disciplines — be it in the laboratory, while travelling or in archives — and what kind of questions researchers engage with around the globe. It is not only a showcase of academic achievements, but rather the visualization of cognitive processes in the history and present of academic practice, which also includes controversies, speculations, errors and limitations. The aim is to actively involve visitors, integrating them into a journey from the initial inspiration to the research breakthrough, and also to highlight the different approaches of the disciplines on this path of knowledge. For these creative design processes, experimental forms of exhibition presentation are being developed.

In this cooperation between academia and museums, the old idea of a “sanctuary for art and science” is brought back to the fore, which the Humboldt brothers sought to combine in the museum and the University in the 19th century. The city’s cultural, research and educational institutions join forces to create a place of information, togetherness and pleasure.

Humboldt-Universität is participating in designing the Humboldt Forum in various ways. It is mediating research as a cultural practice of daring and precision, discussing socially relevant topics in academia, making disciplines and methods comprehensible as conscious, visual limitations, testing and developing new forms of academic communication, and demonstrating the importance of research and university for society as a whole. The Humboldt Lab will therefore exhibit core research, relying on the research focuses of Berlin’s seven Clusters of Excellence (large-scale, collaborative research projects with specific research focuses, funded within the framework of the Excellence Strategy of the German the federal and state governments).

What is more, Humboldt-Universität will use the Lab as a venue to display its traditional collections. Among others, exhibits from the Sound Archives and the Computer Museum will illustrate the rapid technological transformation of our time — and even the visitors themselves will become part of a living artefact: a giant interactive display at the entrance of the Humboldt Lab showing a school of fish captures the movement of individual visitors and groups and displays them in an engineered yet artistic manner. This striking visualization serves as a transition into various academic discussions addressed in the exhibition. Making the visitors part of the exhibition symbolizes the participatory and dialogical approach of Berlin’s Knowledge Exchange.

The exhibits will be moveable to guarantee individual views and multiple perspectives. Screens and displays will project different “layers” of information, e.g. on a large map of the world. The visitors will be invited to access them as individuals and to contribute personal opinions on the topics addressed. With this approach, the core topics of Humboldt Lab’s opening

exhibition, social challenges and climate change, will be just as dynamic, interactive and fast-changing as the underlying phenomena are in reality. In keeping with the tradition of the 250-year-old Cosmos Lectures, the Humboldt Lab will continue to promote and encourage vivid dialogue and exchange within innovative formats.

PERSPECTIVES

The Humboldt Forum is the logical continuation and expansion of our mandate as a university in the footsteps of Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt. So how did we arrive at this point? And what informs our process of developing a new third mission that fosters conversation between academia and society?

Universities are part of a living, developing society

All over the world, academic freedom is currently exposed to the scepticism of different groups. A lack of information can also trigger doubts about the credibility or even necessity of individual research projects. In addition to external attacks on academia, some threats are self-inflicted and inherent to the system. Instances like the replication crisis in bioscience research or the plagiarism crisis create doubt about the integrity and credibility of academic knowledge. Academia urgently needs to reclaim society's basic trust.

More often than not, criticizing academia also means criticizing the elite. A recent example of institutions reacting to the heavy criticism of social elites can be seen in the *École nationale d'administration*, a well-known French educational institution that is regarded as elitist and has been threatened with closure. It is not only in light of this that we, as research institutions, must concern ourselves with this part of the debate. We need to ask ourselves how universities are perceived by the general public and how we communicate. What kind of content can a university deliver as part of a knowledge exchange that actually interests civil society, and what does society expect from us?

As a result, educational institutions need to provide a sufficient flow of information that does not address the academic community exclusively. It must be ensured that civil society can formulate opinions based on open researched facts. This includes barrier-free access to and continuous quality control of the mediating instruments.

One of the institutions at Humboldt Universität that exemplifies this approach is the Berlin Institute for Empirical Integration and Migration Research (BIM), founded in 2014. BIM focuses on theory-based, empirical research that is always rooted in fundamental research, integrating a broad range of disciplinary perspectives — from empirical social sciences to religious

studies, from linguistics to education studies. At the same time, BIM strives to achieve a systematic transfer of research into the public sphere, ranging from critical monitoring of political debates to events addressing the public and media interventions. In this respect, the BIM sees itself as an active observer of societal trends. It also serves as a bridge-builder between research and policy development, with many examples of BIM research directly shaping policymaking at the local and national level.

BIM is part of Humboldt-Universität, but it is also located in a city that is itself marked by exceptionally high levels of citizens with migrant backgrounds and that finds itself in close proximity to the policymakers of both the federal government and the state of Berlin. BIM brings all these realities into play and creates a unique new model of a scholarly institution that moves into the core of societal debates, simultaneously assuming the roles of analyst and fact-checker, moderator and coach, sounding board and consultant.

To provide an example, the Department of Integration, Sport and Football researches, consults and prompts public impetus regarding issues of achievement in sports and football in relation to social integration. On the one hand, the department distinguishes itself by conducting basic, theory-driven and empirical research regarding interdisciplinary research on integration, social capital and civil society. On the other hand, it conducts empirical, application-oriented research, which, for instance, includes evaluation studies on sports federations, sports associations and civic engagement. Research results are introduced into the academic community. At the same time, they serve as a source of empirical counselling support for actors in government, politics, civil society and the economy. Current research is thus linked to current debate, serving as the basis for a bidirectional knowledge exchange between university and society.

In short, we need to react to society's needs and developments by providing objective information and communicating it in a way that really reaches society. In order to achieve this, however, we must continuously assess and improve our communication formats and channels. I am thinking in particular of digital formats and technology-based knowledge transfer in order to interest younger sections of the population as well as new target groups. These target groups in return are estimated to supply researchers with new insights into contemporary requirements for teaching, learning and accessing knowledge in general.

In the field of teaching, "analogue teaching", with the immediacy of its knowledge transfer and the personal teacher-student relationship, remains highly attractive, perhaps precisely because it is analogue and therefore popular with students, increasing numbers of whom are "digital natives". Humboldt-Universität is therefore currently blazing the trail in the design of a very traditional and important authority within the University, the

professorship. Together with the foundation Stiftung Humboldt Forum, we will fill a professorship for interdisciplinary curating with a decided focus on practical experience with an expert in exhibition practice.

All of these approaches aim to help us communicate better with society and open up to current issues.

Universities can't do it alone

The area of third mission has so far been rather generic in Germany, and researchers may often be unaware that their research contains elements that could be highly relevant to society. Often researchers involved with third mission projects working in one institution have no knowledge of each other and work in parallel. Accordingly, synergies and the potential for professionalization are not sufficiently exploited, there is only poor communication within the institution, and external communication through strategic bundling is effectively hindered.

However, we have to acknowledge that contemporary grand challenges, as well as their exploration, negotiation and communication, can only be successful in cooperation with other (educational) institutions. Universities are therefore advised to approach and design their third mission activities in cooperative formats. A collaboration that includes different types of institutions makes it possible to develop a particularly broad range of exchange formats with society. This is where strategy-building processes should be initiated to network the stakeholders more closely, sharpen the common goal of the third mission as a cooperative task and help ensure the effect of these joint efforts. By developing inter-institutional offerings and services, universities can become more attractive, accessible and visible. Of course, these offers will vary depending on whether it is a matter of cooperation between research and industry, between two educational institutions or between the university and the public sector. For all these scenarios, we must first develop our specific approach as a university and define the specific added value that we can create for our institution and for society here.

Cooperation may also help to identify one's own limitations and preconditions more easily in order to overcome institutional bias. German universities in general — and Humboldt-Universität in particular — have long been active in opening their doors through public events and a variety of participation formats. But it has not always been possible to create the awareness one might want to achieve and to develop new stakeholder groups. Building a third mission together with strong partners could mean generating added value in terms of the effect and effectiveness of this mission.

Humboldt-Universität is currently pursuing this path of cooperation primarily with the very successful museums that are an essential part of Berlin's

incredibly rich cultural landscape. In the future, it will do so not only with the site of the Humboldt Forum mentioned above, but also with the Berlin National History Museum (Museum für Naturkunde Berlin), one of the world's most important research museums in the field of evolutionary, biodiversity and geoprocessing research. In order to make this cooperation tangible and accessible to the public, the museum and Humboldt-Universität are currently planning a joint science campus. The focus here is on two areas: citizen science and public engagement. Both are development areas for research institutions today, for a university even more so than for a museum.

In the close cooperation between these two institutions, we want to explore the extent to which the participation of civil society in research processes is a fruitful endeavour and how far it can be expanded. In the area of public engagement, we want to make concrete offers to researchers to develop new competencies in this field. Our aim is to strengthen the responsibility of research for and in society. In the long term, we want to increase the relevance and effectiveness of research, e.g. through more effective communication with and policy advice from researchers.

The Berlin University Alliance — the joint effort of Freie Universität Berlin, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Technische Universität Berlin and Charité — Universitätsmedizin, currently a candidate in the German Excellence Strategy competition — is a further example of how to strengthen knowledge exchange by setting up a matrix structure and crossing institutional boundaries on a collaborative, city-wide level.

In summary, the platforms used for public engagement (and training on it) must focus on the joint development of experimental formats, academically, technologically and socially for the purpose of stronger mediation in analogue and digital formats — each focusing on immediate dialogue.

Universities are communities

In its most basic sense, the word “university” stands for the community of teachers and students. We would do well not to forget that. A good conversation needs both sides, society as well as university members — and this new focus on conversation and third mission is potentially challenging for a university. There is a balance to be struck when determining the relationship between freedom of research and teaching and new demands to open up academia to society.

Basic research, cutting-edge research that meets the highest standards as well as high quality teaching can only continue to exist productively if we do not overload it with an undifferentiated call for third mission or simply distract researchers from achieving optimum productivity. It must therefore be part of the claim “conversation is key” to make very precise and explicit

distinctions, and not to expect each member of our institution in every phase of their academic work to engage in this conversation. A balance between academic and societal stakes and priorities is needed.

We should also focus more on our own research about a university's opportunities to engage in conversation with society. The discussion about "key performance indicators" and the question of criteria for the measurability of research impact is currently on the agenda on an international level. Humboldt-Universität is asking itself these questions with its newly founded interdisciplinary research institute, the Robert K. Merton Center for Science Studies. This interdisciplinary platform for research and teaching in science studies provides a place for exchange and cooperation for researchers interested in how science works and will include its object of research in the research process itself.

But if we want to reach as many researchers as possible with the idea that "conversation is key", we will have to provide attractive offers and incentives. Academic career paths are highly competitive, so we have to ensure that working with society also pays off within the academic community and among peers. Even if our researchers are intrinsically motivated to perform third mission functions, we still need to answer how we as institutions value, awaken and incentivize this commitment. And, above all, we need to determine how this translates into added value for the reputation of these researchers in a system in which reputation so far stems largely from within the academic community and where only the "academic impact" matters.

This calls for a change in political framework conditions, but also for a cultural change among the funding institutions for research and teaching. If they do not want third mission to be understood as one of many side-aspects to be ticked off when applying for funding, it must be provided with adequate resources. Last but not least, such incentives should include offers in the field of communication skills to help avoid conversation hindrances such as over-complex academic jargon. In our capacity as research management, we must therefore ask ourselves very precisely how we can help researchers and stimulate conversation.

In the future, this exchange will form part of academic education right from the very start. To this end, opportunities for continued education and training are necessary to make established academic staff aware of the significance of bidirectional transfer. At the same time, universities must familiarize themselves with appropriate tools and knowledge on how to engage with different target groups. Since aspects of the third mission, such as transfer and knowledge exchange, are currently considered potential performance dimensions in research funding and third-party funding, it is also advisable for universities to invest in their employees in order to prepare them early on for upcoming competitions. But, as a German foundation (the Körber

Foundation) just recently analysed for the Global University Leaders Council Hamburg, the third mission area has so far only been relatively weakly incorporated into the University's own formal administrative, managerial and organizational structures. At the same time, this study makes the important point that the political and legal framework conditions urgently need to be clarified so that the gap between the social demands placed on universities and the universities' ability to fulfil these demands set by its third mission does not grow any further.

I would like to stress that universities need to take into consideration more thoroughly the interests and requirements of their members in order to fulfil their function as places of rational discourse, production and development of socially relevant academic knowledge — even under changing conditions.

To sum up, the (third) mission of Humboldt-Universität will be to develop structures to best foster and improve dialogue and conversation with society. To achieve this goal, we will establish regional, national and international collaborations for the purpose of (joint) institutional policymaking. The University's aim is to establish Berlin as a capital of contemporary knowledge exchange in all its facets. Scholars from a wide range of fields are already researching contemporary societies and their individual challenges. Since the above-mentioned phenomena are not only relevant as abstract research questions for academic discourse, but should also, and more importantly, contribute to social development, they can't be considered and investigated without engaging in a direct dialogue with their subject: society.

REFERENCES

- Steinmeier, F.-W. (2019). Opening of the Cosmos Lecture Series, part of the celebrations organized by the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin to mark the 250th birthday of Alexander von Humboldt. Berlin, 6 April 2019. [Online] https://www.bundespraesident.de/SharedDocs/Downloads/DE/Reden/2019/04/190406-Kosmos-Lesung-Englisch.pdf;jsessionid=ED50AE7128D36B60DFB-F80F1B19E5786.2_cid371?__blob=publicationFile [Accessed 27 May 2019].