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## **The Cultural Dimension of Universities**

### **HRK German Rectors' Conference**

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### I. Universities are cultural institutions

Universities are key cultural players. They explore knowledge, meanings, experiences and ways of perceiving diverse cultural structures as well as the diversity of cultural concepts themselves. In this way, they contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage. They convey design skills; they create and examine performances and materialisations of culture.

Universities as cultural institutions are also places of education that create the basis for cultural developments and transformations: They impart knowledge and artistic skills as the basis for works, products and ideas. They enable artistic processes of perceiving, understanding and recognising, in which knowledge and skills are generated and transformed. They open up spaces for multi-perspective and inter- and transcultural discourse, which enable students to categorise knowledge in contexts of meaning and thus develop and change their attitudes and worldviews autonomously. They co-creatively generate knowledge between their members and society. They enable the acquisition of competencies with which cultural and social conditions can be critically questioned and reshaped. In cultural terms, too, universities are proving to be the "workshops of the future of society"<sup>1</sup>.

All types of higher education institutions contribute to the cultural dimension, be it artistically through what is creatively produced in an aesthetic dimension, be it culturally in the exchange of knowledge and meanings with other education institutions and third parties, be it philosophical and reflective in the understanding of art, design and culture in historical and social contexts. Universities thus contribute to creation and innovation and in this way lay the foundations for the transmission of culture and a lifelong in-depth engagement with it. In accordance with this aspiration and the responsibility associated with it, German universities, with their broad diversification, are actors in the cultural dimension in a variety of ways. This dimension is as much of fundamental importance as teaching, research or transfer of knowledge, for example, and requires equal attention, space to develop, control and funding.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. HRK recommendation "For a culture of sustainability", 6 November 2018, [https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-01-Beschluesse/HRK\\_MV\\_Empfehlung\\_Nachhaltigkeit\\_06112018\\_EN.pdf](https://www.hrk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/hrk/02-Dokumente/02-01-Beschluesse/HRK_MV_Empfehlung_Nachhaltigkeit_06112018_EN.pdf) (14.11.2023).

## II. Special potential of the cultural dimension of universities

With the first sentence of its constitution: "That since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed"<sup>2</sup>, UNESCO puts into words the effectiveness of culture, which as an internalised fabric of concepts and meanings is decisive for the development of practices,<sup>3</sup> as the guiding principle of its institutional work.

With different research concepts, the universities are jointly committed to the partly systematic, partly creative and unintentional search for knowledge about the world. This knowledge is expressed in different bodies and forms. Research can refer to the generation of explicit knowledge and factual knowledge. Research also refers to the exploration of implicit or experiential knowledge as well as narrative, visual or performative forms of knowledge. This also includes opening up new perspectives on existing bodies of knowledge and critically scrutinising their conditions of origin. These bodies and forms of knowledge make up an essential part of the constructions in people's minds that determine social interactions.

Urgent social challenges such as creating social cohesion, securing peace, combating poverty and the ecological crisis require not only social and technological innovations,<sup>4</sup> but above all cultural knowledge and cultural practices,<sup>5</sup> which convey meanings to people and offer new perspectives by presenting alternative worlds that enable responsible action and can promote new social structures and technological developments. The cultural dimension is therefore also of central importance for education for sustainable development.

Universities as cultural institutions are places that enable the learning, practising and development of new artistic and cultural practices that can initiate social transformations. These may be practices that transfer innovative knowledge and offer innovative world views to the wider society. It is not least this highly effective aspect of culture that is practised at universities that offers the best protection against the regimentation and suppression of academic and artistic freedom and educational processes that take place in authoritarian states. The visual and performing arts and design with their possibilities beyond logocentric communication – for example through artistic research, aesthetic

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<sup>2</sup> UNESCO, <https://www.unesco.org/en/legal-affairs/constitution> (14.11.2023).

<sup>3</sup> HRK statement of 11 November 2022 on the draft of a future strategy for research and innovation, p. 3 (in the PDF collection of all statements (available only in German) [https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/de/forschung/zukunftsstrategie/publikationen/stellungnahm\\_en-textentwurf-zukunftsstrategie-fi.pdf?\\_blob=publicationFile&v=1](https://www.bmbf.de/bmbf/de/forschung/zukunftsstrategie/publikationen/stellungnahm_en-textentwurf-zukunftsstrategie-fi.pdf?_blob=publicationFile&v=1) (14.11.2023).

<sup>4</sup> According to the Federal Government's future strategy for research and innovation from February 2023, [https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Publikationen/de/bmbf/FS/747580\\_Zukunftsstrategie\\_Forschung\\_und\\_Innovation\\_en.pdf?\\_blob=publicationFile&v=2](https://www.bmbf.de/SharedDocs/Publikationen/de/bmbf/FS/747580_Zukunftsstrategie_Forschung_und_Innovation_en.pdf?_blob=publicationFile&v=2) (14.11.2023).

<sup>5</sup> See Goal 4.7 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> (14.11.2023).

education or multisensorial affectation – have an outstanding role to play here, as they can touch people deeply, create resonances, break up patterns, make the invisible visible and make audible unheard or overheard voices and thus transform patterns of perception and interpretation in the long term.

As cultural institutions, universities also play an important role in the preservation of cultural artefacts, for example by maintaining and caring for scientific or cultural and historical collections, by safeguarding the written cultural and scientific tradition in the libraries associated with them, which are also important places of cultural education, or by identifying and researching world heritage sites. They are important partners for a wide range of cultural institutions.

Universities have numerous forms of action at their disposal with which they can act in the cultural dimension. In addition to the cultural activities of universities in research, education and innovation, particular attention should be paid to formats that enable cultural exchange with and in society: For the transfer of cultural knowledge and cultural practices, universities can, in addition to established forms of publication, make use of all possible means of science communication, including scientific and cultural and historical exhibitions of objects and artefacts, textual and pictorial source material in university museums, archives and libraries.

However, the current existential crises threatening societies all over the world also require intervening formats that promise greater transformative effectiveness, for example through high affective potential. Higher education institutions, not just the universities of art and music whose core activities include this, are already venues for a wide range of cultural events such as exhibitions, performances, concerts, opera, theatre, dance and film performances, readings and poetry slams. Such formats can be deployed not only as artistically autonomous, but also as knowledge-communicating and knowledge-producing interventions in the political sphere and critical commentaries on social discourses.

### **III. Recommendations for the development of the cultural dimension of universities**

In their cultural dimension, universities are not yet receiving the necessary attention in higher education policy. Their long-term establishment requires not only internal university processes, but also supporting external processes.

Within the university, it is important to identify, actively shape and make visible the cultural dimension as a cross-sectional task in teaching, research, internationalisation, transfer and operations. This also opens up new possibilities and opportunities for the development of governance

and university strategies, which each university can formulate according to its profile and needs and develop into a fourth mission.

The further development of interdisciplinary research and teaching and cross-university cooperation and collaboration with non-university stakeholders such as concert halls, theatres, museums, public libraries or the cultural and creative sectors is of particular importance, as the productivity of culture is particularly evident in the border regions between different cultural complexes – be it knowledge, specialist or institutional cultures – through self-reflection and negotiation processes.

As far as the establishment of external support is concerned, higher education policy and funding institutions, in particular the German Research Foundation (DFG), are called upon to take the cultural dimension of universities into account through existing funding formats, if necessary also by adapting committee structures and appointments, to develop new funding formats – for example in the area of artistic research – and to explicitly take this dimension into account in education and research strategies in order to raise the potential of universities in the cultural dimension and make it fruitful for the future viability of society.