

02 July 2020**HRK Senate: Priority for health protection – as much face-to-face teaching as possible**

The Senate of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) has unanimously affirmed its commitment to making health protection an absolute priority in the organisation of the upcoming winter semester. It was completely undisputed that universities are and want to be attendance-based institutions – now and in the future. However, it considers the call for an immediate return to face-to-face contact to be inappropriate given the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

“The exchange of views between Senate members on the framework conditions and options for studying and teaching in the next semester has clearly shown that the guideline must be ‘as much attendance as possible, but only to the extent that is responsible’”, said HRK President Peter-André Alt. It is expected to be a semester that focuses on digital teaching, combined with face-to-face teaching wherever justifiable.

“Universities have to have planning security for the autumn. Every university needs preliminary planning and cannot repeatedly change course on demand. Furthermore, the design and implementation of digital and face-to-face lectures are not freely interchangeable. University management must therefore now create secure prospects that take into account a continuing and possibly even aggravated coronavirus situation.”

A key concern of universities is that consideration be given to the many foreign students who will probably not all be able to travel to Germany and attend face-to-face lectures.

The discussion often fails to recognise the specific situation of universities. Alt: “Comparisons with associations or schools are completely wrong. The ability of students to organise themselves and learn on their own is much greater than that of school children, enabling them to succeed digitally in spite of all compromises. However, there are considerable additional risk factors for students and staff, and thus ultimately for the entire population: the size of universities alone, often with several thousand people, illustrates the scale of the challenges. Unlike schoolchildren, students move between their place of study and their hometown, thus bringing additional infection risks into the universities. Increased commuting by public transport between face-to-face lectures and digital lectures also entails heightened risks that must be taken into account when planning the range of courses on offer.”

Corona-related hygiene regulations are still in place in most federal states. In order to ensure that the necessary social distancing rules are complied with at universities, it became apparent in the Senate that external premises with maximum capacity would have to be rented for large lectures, because they could not be organised in libraries or refectories with the full attendance of all university members.

HRK President Alt: "It is reasonable for universities to align their measures with their respective needs and capabilities. These vary greatly depending on size, the building situation and, above all, subjects. In experimental subjects, for example, studying in laboratories cannot be abandoned for long periods of time, and practical training is indispensable in sports and medical degrees. In turn, the range of subjects at artistic universities requires a high proportion of small group and individual study. Therefore, face-to-face teaching can and must be increasingly applied in these cases."

The HRK Senate affirmed its commitment to paying particular attention to the situation of first-semester students and students in examination phases. "It is clear that these groups of people have a special need for attendance-based teaching. Universities are drawing up plans for this. The HRK will support the exchange between university heads to this end," said HRK President Alt.

The Senate appealed to all university members as well as to policy-makers and observers to consider the great responsibility of universities for the health and study prospects of everyone in the debate. Alt: "We must do everything in our power to prevent universities from becoming coronavirus hotspots. They will return to largely face-to-face teaching as quickly as is reasonable. Despite all the complications, we should not forget that we can benefit from current experiences if we analyse them without reservation and reach conclusions in terms of the further constructive development of our teaching, including digital components."