

**18 March 2021****HRK calls for continued responsible approach to face-to-face contact in higher education settings during the COVID-19 pandemic**

It is still not possible to return to normal face-to-face contact at universities due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The Senate of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) reiterated this point at its online meeting on Tuesday. "During our in-depth discussion on the current situation across the various federal states, universities and disciplines, it soon became clear that offering a tailored blend of digital and face-to-face teaching is still the only sensible approach," explained HRK President Prof Dr Peter-André Alt after the meeting. "The universities stick to their position, which is determined by a sense of responsibility and scientifically justified caution and which was already formulated in principle in June of last year".

"A long list of factors needs to be considered before any decision to return to face-to-face lessons can be made. The universities are still being required to carefully weigh up the facts in front of them at any given time. They are prioritising courses that simply cannot be delivered online or that involve a serious amount of work or compromise to go digital," explained Alt. That includes in particular lab-based teaching and learning and other practical work as well as the corresponding exams. Depending on the subjects and universities, the needs and possibilities vary greatly. For example, many degree programmes in the arts, medicine and sport really suffer when face-to-face teaching is restricted.

The universities are looking for ways to incorporate the increase in testing capacity into their established hygiene practices with a view to gradually introducing face-to-face teaching for a small group of socially distanced students with a clearly defined, small group of participants in attendance. However, the case numbers need to have dropped to a certain level and the universities have to be sure that they have the necessary funds and logistics covered. For example, they need direct access to rapid lateral flow tests as well as PCR tests in the case of positive (or false positive) test results. It is also important for them to consider how students will get to and from the campus and how the spaces outside the actual lecture halls will be arranged.

The Senate reiterated the HRK President's call to the Federal Government and the Länder not to ignore the higher education sector in their future agreements on combating the pandemic and to take into account the high burden on teaching staff and students as well as the performance of universities, which has been repeatedly demonstrated in the pandemic. However, according to the Senate, the development of the vaccination campaign is ultimately decisive for substantial progress.