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HRK President on plans to restructure the European Commission, with research and education set to finally be reunited

After the President-elect of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, introduced her team for the future EU Commission and the departmental structure, Prof Dr Peter-André Alt, President of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), made the following statement:

"Education and research are set to be reunited for the first time since 1999, with Commissioner for Innovation and Youth, Mariya Gabriel, taking on the role of coordinator. The mission letter to the Commissioner-designate makes it clear that Ms von der Leyen intends to make use of the close ties between education, research and innovation.

In recent years, the HRK has campaigned strongly for an integrated strategy that does justice to universities as the points of contact between education, research and innovation. The way these individual fields have been handled by different Directorates-General has been anything but beneficial for higher education policy in Europe.

We are especially delighted to see that the programme aimed at the creation of European university networks is specifically listed as a priority of the von der Leyen Commission. This should advance universities' excellence and international competitiveness. We sincerely hope that the programme will continue to have the financial backing it deserves and that the entire range of university activities will be supported going forward, including, above all, the strategic connection of research and innovation as a way of building up network profiles.

I find the name of the new department – "Innovation and Youth" – to be somewhat problematic.

It seems to suggest that education and research are to play second fiddle to direct economic and social benefits even more noticeably. But in fact research and education are long-term investments that can unleash a wealth of effects on society. With this in mind, it is also worrying that there is no mention of the European Research Council as the guiding light for research prowess in Europe in the job description for the new Commissioner. Basic research has obviously not been considered carefully enough, even though it lays the foundations for acquiring new knowledge and, in turn, gaining a competitive edge for Germany and Europe in the long term."