

18 November 2019**HRK Annual Assembly dominated by debate surrounding academic freedom**

Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier has just stressed the special responsibility of universities to defend and develop a – currently threatened – culture of debate to the guests attending the Annual Assembly of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK). The HRK Annual Assembly took place in Hamburg at the invitation of the local university, where tomorrow's General Assembly will also be held. The University of Hamburg is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year.

"If we want to learn how to debate again, then we should do so here at the universities," said the Federal President. According to Steinmeier, the university could and should be a centre for controversies. "Without toxicity being covertly or openly spread. But rather with poignancy and dispute, wit and competition," he said. "Besides internationalisation, digitalisation and optimisation, the excellence of a university is predominantly measured by whether that which our democracy urgently needs is being fostered and practised there: mature debate, reasoned controversy and civilised dispute."

Taking the history of the University of Hamburg as an example, Federal President Steinmeier highlighted the profound impact that universities have on politics and culture. He went on to say that those who go to university, whether as teachers or students, enter a space of intellectual, as well as political, discussion. For that reason, the German Rectors' Conference quite rightly entitled its 2016 policy paper "Universities as organisational centres of the research system and key players in society".

In his welcome address, HRK President Prof Dr Peter-André Alt called for academic freedom to be clarified and the role of universities in society to be defined correctly. Even freedom requires rules. "This includes striving to embed political views expressed at universities in a scientific discourse. In so doing, universities highlight the precedence that rational science has over questions of political positioning," said Alt.

University president Prof Dr Dieter Lenzen touched upon the achievements made on the basis of free academic work at the university founded in 1919, as well as on the injustice committed by the university during the era of National Socialism. "As a result, the University of Hamburg is particularly sensitive to every extremist right-wing attempt to curtail academic freedom," said Lenzen.