Dear reader,

The German Rectors’ Conference draws its strength from the strength of its members: The universities are the heart of the German academic and research system. They combine education and research, conduct the major share of research, train early career researchers and serve as interdisciplinary ‘think tanks’ of the nation. They are supported in all these missions by the German Rectors’ Conference, the HRK. Like the universities themselves, the HRK stands for autonomy and freedom, diversity and innovation, open-mindedness and internationality. As the alliance of German universities, the HRK is an independent partner for politics, business and society.

This publication offers you insights into key issues the HRK and the universities are tackling at present. What is our current position, what principles are we guided by, and what have we been achieving over recent months? A few highlights:

Funding: The HRK is calling for increased stability and dependability in government funding, so that universities can meet the needs of the half a million new students enrolling each year and the steadily growing number of research projects. In this context the HRK has put forward a proposal for safeguarding long-term higher education funding from the Federal Government, the so-called “Two Pillars Plus” model.

Transfer and cooperation: The HRK believes that universities have a responsibility to seek dialogue with the broader public and to actively explore the concerns of stakeholders in business, education and civil society. The HRK urges the federal and state governments to be constructively involved in this process and to support universities by ensuring the appropriate institutional frameworks to make this possible.

Freedom in scholarship and society: The HRK campaigns for academic freedom and for academics at risk across the globe. With the help of an HRK initiative, universities are communicating a powerful message of openness and opposition to xenophobia in Germany. The HRK also promotes and supports dialogue between German universities to facilitate the integration of refugee students and refugees who aspire to study.

I do hope you will be able to find a few quiet minutes to read further about these issues and others. The enclosed leaflet also offers you some quick impressions of Germany’s diverse higher education landscape.

Kind regards

Professor Peter-André Alt
HRK President
Universities in Dialogue with Society

The universities’ academic freedom and self-governance are guaranteed under the constitution. At the same time, universities themselves are an integral part of society and thus need to respond to societal expectations. Both the institution and its individual members are committed to transparency and accountability, promoting an open dialogue with all societal stakeholders.

The German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) supports its member universities in their endeavour to build on their strengths and develop their profile. The HRK believes this continuous task and challenge is inextricably linked to a clear acknowledgement of the universities’ role in society. It therefore encourages dialogue with the public and wants universities to engage with the concerns of other players in society, especially in business and industry, education and civil society.

The HRK stresses, however, that this must always be a dialogue from which all sides benefit. Guided by these principles, the HRK has undertaken several respective activities in recent years.

As an example, protecting at-risk researchers is a top priority for the HRK. It has been collaborating closely with the international Scholars at Risk network and has been involved in the German section since September 2016. The HRK regularly issues calls to actively counter any anti-academic sentiments. It also consistently lobbies governments when academic freedoms or individual academics or researchers are threatened.

Additionally, the HRK supports the communication activities undertaken by universities through the “Wissenschaft im Dialog” initiative, which it co-founded in 1999. This initiative tests innovative science communication formats and organises an annual forum for communication experts. The HRK has also been awarding a prize for university communication in conjunction with ZEIT Verlag and Robert Bosch Stiftung since 2005. In 2017, the topic of the competition was “Knowledge for society: communicating current higher education research”.

As part of the “German Universities. Open to the world. Against racism and chauvinism” campaign launched in 2015, the HRK started an initiative encouraging open-mindedness and countering prejudice to give wider exposure to what is after all the general stance of German academics on these issues.

Also, the HRK has been supporting universities in integrating refugees who were students in their home countries or who are interested in higher education. This task has posed considerable challenges for universities, particularly with the arrival of increased numbers of refugees since 2015. Yet the universities have taken on this challenge with immense commitment, drawing on their many years of experience in integrating international students.
Universities and their Legal Framework

The Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany, the country’s constitution, guarantees the freedom of sciences, research and teaching. It therefore builds the foundation of the German higher education system. As universities are predominantly under the control of the sixteen federal states, the respective state laws and constitutions are the second most important legal basis for universities. By contrast, only a few matters are regulated at federal level, for example higher education qualifications and university admission.

 Broadly speaking, state universities have a high level of self-governance when it comes to regulating academic matters. However, the exact extent of this autonomy is often the subject of political debate and negotiations between the universities and the respective federal states. Universities strive for autonomy, particularly when it comes to managing and distributing finances and making decisions on staff structure, the appointment of professors and matters of general organisation.

The German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) supports universities in their endeavour for maximum autonomy. It believes the universities’ freedom of action, flexibility, and planning security is essential if they want to hold their own against global competition. At the same time, it acknowledges that universities are accountable to government and the country’s citizens regarding their actions. The HRK weighs in on the redrafting of state and federal laws. It challenges and makes suggestions, and is frequently asked to state its position on legislation and case law.

From the HRK’s perspective, the federal state governments should focus on the legal supervision of the universities and should not go down the route of ministerial decrees and individual directives. The HRK is campaigning for the introduction of global budgets for universities. All universities should also have the right to nominate and appoint professors. The interests of the federal states, and thus the taxpayer, should be taken into consideration in multi-annual target agreements and institutional contracts. At the same time, the regulatory system within the university should strike a balance between the university’s development as an institution and individual interests, particularly those of academic staff.

Against this backdrop, the HRK continuously deals with the various aspects of university governance. For example, in spring 2017 the HRK outlined organisational structures that make maximally productive use of the complex interaction between the various institutional bodies. The HRK also touched upon important individual issues, such as how to competently process data and information in the digital age, the growing importance of social media, systematic staff development and promoting equal opportunities for women in academia and science.
University Funding

90 percent of higher education funding in Germany is secured through public funds. Just 10 percent comes from private sources, mainly research commissioned by companies. Tuition fees play practically no role in Germany.

In accordance with the federal allocation of responsibilities, the federal states fund the largest part of university expenditure. They provide around 75 percent of the universities’ budget, thus securing the basic funding. Federal government gets involved in university funding by financing research projects through special programmes (including the Excellence Strategy and the Higher Education Pact). It currently covers around 15 percent of university expenditure.

Due to the increased demand for study places, the federal states are finding it increasingly difficult to provide appropriate funding to universities. Given the economic importance of education, the federal government has very recently ramped up the financial support it provides. Until a few years ago, however, the Basic Law would not allow the federal government to provide basic funding. So it increased its research budget and reached an agreement with the federal states on a fixed-term programme to finance additional study places. The Basic Law was amended in late 2016, enabling the federal government to provide also basic funding to universities.

The federal states’ financial challenges and the increasing commitment of the federal government have led to a change in the way universities are financed. The proportion of fixed-term and competitively awarded funding has continued to rise. This limits the universities’ ability to plan and makes it necessary for permanent tasks at universities to be covered by staff on fixed-term contracts. The HRK has therefore repeatedly urged the federal government to make use of the change in the Basic Law and to provide basic funding to universities.

In its mid-2017 resolution on “Funding of the higher education system from 2020 onwards”, the HRK provided a detailed explanation of the fact that German universities do not just need money for the increasing demand for study places. To hold their own against international competition, they need funding for construction and renovation, digitisation, and overheads for research projects and research infrastructures. The HRK is also in favour of a continuous increase in basic funding going forward. This would enable universities to compete against non-university research institutions, which play an important role in Germany and which are by law guaranteed an increase in funding of three percent year on year.
Publicly financed research in Germany is predominantly conducted at universities and universities of applied sciences. They collaborate closely with non-university research institutions – not just on research projects, but also in the form of joint professorships and in joint doctoral training programmes. Traditionally, German universities also closely cooperate in research, development and innovation with companies in Germany and abroad.

Higher education institutions conduct research and teaching across the full spectrum of scientific and scholarly disciplines. The variety of institutional types and the disciplines they represent make them the perfect place for cross-disciplinary collaboration. The unity of research and teaching is essential for German universities; teaching benefits from the proximity to the latest research processes.

The German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) emphasises the key role of universities in the knowledge triangle of education, research and innovation. It supports the claim that substantial funding for both fundamental and application-oriented research must be provided, but is strongly opposed to university research being subjected to commercial pressures.

The HRK supports universities in the process of defining key areas in research and development based on their chosen strategy. This way the university can develop priorities in academic disciplines and form the necessary critical mass of staff and infrastructures in certain areas. The HRK supports this process in several ways, including its Research Map, which visualises the research priorities of each individual university and thus of the entire German higher education system.

At national and international level, the HRK promotes the view that the core of doctoral education is the independent research work of the doctoral candidate. This first independent research makes it the key phase for early career researchers. At the same time, the HRK stresses that the right to confer a doctoral degree is the natural privilege of a university.

At EU level, the HRK supports the creation of a European education, research and innovation community with universities at its very centre. This community shall be based on creative political collaboration between the European Union, member states and regions/federal states on a level playing field.
Doctoral graduates are in high demand at German companies requiring managers and researchers, so doctoral training collaborations have been established between universities and businesses. The HRK engages in regular dialogue with major industry associations on this topic as well as others. Jointly, the HRK and the industry associations published guidelines for doctoral training collaborations in March 2018. These guidelines underline the fact that universities have the sole responsibility for academic procedures and standards.

The HRK has also been heavily involved in discussions regarding tax exemption for research work conducted by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The objective is to identify solutions that are manageable for individual tax authorities and that act as genuine incentives to conduct research. The HRK suggests making collaboration agreements between companies and universities the basis for tax exemption. This would create a clear distinction between a university partnership and a company’s other development work and ensure that the research activity is genuinely enhanced.

Science-friendly, forward-looking copyright legislation is one of the HRK’s key concerns, both at the national and the European level. In 2017, it was actively involved in preparing new legislation to align copyright law with the current demands of the knowledge-based society. The HRK is in favour of open access and a fair pricing policy on the part of academic publishers. As a representative of all major German research organisations, since October 2016 it has been working on the DEAL project, which aims to draw up nationwide licensing agreements for the entire portfolio of electronic journals produced by the three biggest academic publishers.

In spring 2018, the HRK adopted guidelines for stating affiliations in publications so that the research work conducted by universities can be adequately acknowledged. For example, an institutional affiliation may be established through an employment contract or acceptance as a doctoral candidate. Authors may also have more than one affiliation. These guidelines are particularly important in the case of collaborations between universities and non-university research institutions.

The HRK’s Research Map provides information on the key research areas of German universities and universities of applied sciences. The research priorities listed at www.researchmap.de are central to a university’s institutional profile. The Research Map thus helps to identify centres of expertise and helps researchers to explore opportunities for collaboration. Ranging from additive manufacturing to zoonotic diseases and spread throughout the country, the research priorities listed in the Research Map reflect the distributed excellence of German universities. Information is available in both German and English.

www.hrk.de/research-map
The German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) is the association of universities in Germany. The HRK is an independent organisation, representing all types of higher education institutions. Around 94 percent of all students in Germany are enrolled at its member universities. Hence, the HRK is the voice of German universities with respect to policymakers and the public.

**The German Rectors’ Conference**

→ *shapes opinion and represents interests*

The HRK helps to set the political agenda and lead public discussion on all issues relating to the universities. It is involved in developing basic positions at German, European and international level. In this process, it often collaborates with partners from academia and science as well as policymakers, employers’ associations and trade unions. The HRK represents the universities’ positions in Germany and Europe as well as on an international scale.

→ *provides services*

By hosting events and issuing publications the HRK supports its member institutions and provides them with a platform for exchange among each other. Furthermore, the HRK offers individual consultation and has set up specific services on key issues relating to university development so that its members can obtain systematic advice and support, for example on how to implement the European Study Reform, on internationalisation and on digitisation. The HRK also provides policymakers, the media and society with information on the higher education system.

**Roots**

The HRK was set up as the West German Rectors’ Conference (WRK) in 1949, the same year in which the Federal Republic of Germany was established. Its founding was part of Germany’s democratic growth. To this day, the HRK speaks out for academic autonomy, freedom of opinion, tolerance and open-mindedness. Following the unification of the two German states, the first universities from the new federal states joined in 1990 and the WRK was renamed the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK).

**Funding**

The budget of approximately €4.3 million per annum comes from university contributions and funds issued by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research. State governments pay the university contributions for their respective state institutions of higher education. Fixed-term projects receive third-party funding. The Foundation for the Promotion of the HRK is the legal and financial body of the HRK.
How the HRK works

The General Assembly is the supreme decision-making body. It is convened twice a year to discuss and decide on key issues, changes to the HRK’s rules of procedure and the budget. It also elects the President. The General Assembly is always hosted by one of the HRK member institutions.

The Senate meets three times a year. Its main purpose is to ensure the exchange between the universities of all 16 states. The Senate consists of 36 university representatives from across the country.

The Executive Board is the HRK’s governing body. Serving on it are the President, five Vice-Presidents elected by the General Assembly and the spokespeople elected by the member groups of the universities and universities of applied sciences. All Vice-Presidents are current university leaders.

The President represents the HRK both internally and externally. He or she is responsible for day-to-day business and convenes and chairs the meetings of the various bodies. Only current or former university leaders are eligible for this office. The term in office is three years, with the option of being re-elected once.

The Standing Committees prepare the HRK’s resolutions and recommendations. Alongside university leaders, their members include other university representatives and non-university experts.

The HRK offices in Berlin, Bonn and Brussels support the work of the bodies and commissions, provide information and services to both the HRK member universities and the general public.

How to get in touch with the HRK

HRK Cooperation with Africa and the Middle East
Thomas Böhm (boehm@hrk.de)

HRK Cooperation with Asia, Australia and Oceania
Marijke Wahlers (wahlers@hrk.de)

HRK Cooperation with Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia
Rudolf Smolarczyk (smolarczyk@hrk.de)

HRK Cooperation with Western and Southern Europe
Constanze Probst (probst@hrk.de)

HRK Cooperation with Latin America
Iris Danowski (danowski@hrk.de)

HRK Cooperation with North America, the UK and Ireland, the Nordic countries, Turkey and South Asia
Dr. Gordon Bölling (boelling@hrk.de)

HRK Brussels Office
Nils Wörner (woerner@hrk.de)

General enquiries
post@hrk.de
Studying at a university is the central form of post-secondary education in Germany. Study courses are being offered by different types of higher education institutions, ranging from comprehensive universities and universities of applied sciences to colleges of arts and music, pedagogical universities and universities of cooperative education.

Initiated by the European Study Reform (or “Bologna Process”), the introduction of bachelor and master degree programmes shifted the focus on to students’ learning processes; alongside gaining specialist knowledge, acquiring key competencies is systematically encouraged. From developing study programmes to the accreditation for degree courses right through to innovative forms of examination, this has major ramifications for the organisation of teaching and learning. Nevertheless, the overall aim remains unchanged, i.e. to provide an academic education which enhances the students’ personal development while at the same time reflecting the needs of the labour market.

The German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) is deeply committed to the aims of the European Study Reform and refers to the impressive reform efforts on the part of universities, thanks to which the Bologna Process has now been implemented virtually everywhere in Germany. It continuously identifies important steps for further development, for example the facilitation of mobility through improved recognition procedures, the appropriate expansion of system accreditation and better use of flexibility in organising individual courses of study.

The HRK is significantly involved in quality assurance on the basis of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and strives for procedures to ensure and develop the quality of degree programmes while doing justice to the individual profiles of universities. In so doing, the HRK assumes that the unity of research and teaching is key to the quality of teaching and that good teaching primarily depends on capable staff. Ample basic funding is required to attract and keep these staff.

In the 2017/2018 winter semester, around 2.8 million students were enrolled at German universities — a record figure. The number of university entrants has remained constant at around 500,000 since 2011. The number of courses has risen sharply to the current 19,000. In response to the fact that state financing has clearly fallen short of the needs dictated by the number of students and the new forms of study, the HRK has successfully lobbied for the Higher Education Pact. For around ten years, this pact has been providing several batches of additional fixed-term funding from the federal and state governments. The HRK is now advocating for higher education funding to be provided without a time limit, rather than on a fixed-term basis, after 2020.

A revised version of the Qualifications Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (HQR) was adopted in early 2017. This framework plays an important role in accreditation, as this process verifies whether a degree programme complies with the HQR’s description of competencies. With the new version of the HQR drafted together with the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and
Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany and the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, there is now an in-depth description of the competences that should be evident with the completion of a bachelor’s or master’s degree course or a doctoral degree. The HQR is directly related to the German Qualifications Framework, which covers all areas of education. The HRK represents the universities’ interests in the national German Qualifications Framework working group.

The newly structured Accreditation Council, in which the number of representatives from academia and science has significantly increased, has been making decisions on programme or system accreditation and alternative procedures since early 2018. The introduction of this third type of procedure was welcomed by the HRK. It includes external quality assurance procedures at individual universities that comply with the ESG and the requirements stipulated in the ordinances but that go beyond this in terms of quality development.

The increased importance of higher education teaching could be seen at European level through the First European Teaching and Learning Forum in Paris in September 2017. The HRK was actively involved in this event, which was organised by the European University Association (EUA) and the French University Presidents’ Conference (CPU).

The HRK is also focusing on the digitalisation of teaching. It creates significant momentum here as an initiator of and project partner for the Hochschulforum Digitalisierung (Higher Education Forum on Digitalisation). As a member of the Alliance of Science Organisations in Germany, the HRK takes part in the Digital Information 2018–2022 initiative. As well as participating on the steering committee, the HRK makes a significant contribution to the “Digital learning, teaching and networking” working group.

The HRK has been supporting German universities with the “nexus — Forming Transitions, Promoting Student Success” project since 2014. This initiative focuses on optimising the initial phase of a study programme, facilitating student mobility through improved recognition and the transition of graduates to the labour market. The project collaborates with selected groups of experts in the engineering, business and health sciences/medical fields to develop model solutions. As such, round tables have been convened to explore problems and potential solutions in greater detail from the point of view of each discipline. Its regular, highly popular conferences and publications have made nexus an important platform for discussing examples of good practice.

www.hrk-nexus.de/ (in German only)
Today, the German higher education landscape is more international than ever before. Germany is one of the most popular destinations for internationally mobile students and an attractive teaching and research location for scholars and researchers from all over the world. All areas within universities contribute to this internationality of research, teaching and learning. Along with collaboration between universities at the institutional level, there are innumerable cooperation arrangements at faculty and department level, and between institutes and individual researchers. The forms taken by these cooperation arrangements are equally diverse. Today, internationality can be described as part of the fabric of the German higher education landscape.

German universities benefit substantially this cross-border cooperation. Only through close collaboration with its international partners can the German higher education system remain competitive in the long term, both in its curricula and its research and teaching methods. Openness to the world, the capacity for discourse, and cultural understanding all critically depend on international contact. For this reason, the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK) believes that a future-ready university must see itself as a formative part of the global university community and take action accordingly. This creates many challenges – both at the strategic level and in the university’s day-to-day teaching, learning and administration activities. This is why the HRK assists member universities with the internationalisation process by providing recommendations for action and a range of concrete services. Furthermore, the HRK represents the interests of German universities internationally. This involves cooperating with universities, university associations and other partner organisations in Europe and across the world.

Over the past year, consultations with the British, French, Austrian, Polish, Russian and Swiss rectors’ conferences took place on the topic of higher education and research policy and bi- and multilateral cooperation. An HRK delegation also held discussions on higher education policy in Australia. Academic cooperation with Iran was another focus of activities.

The HRK’s activities are based on formats that promote the internationalisation of individual universities as a whole. For example, the HRK Audit ‘Internationalisation of Universities’, introduced in 2009, helps German universities develop a strategic approach to their internationalisation process. By the end of 2016, almost 80 universities had participated in the audit, and a series of audited universities are now in the re-audit phase. The HRK is also able to provide a consultancy service for smaller, specialised universities with its Audit kompakt.

A new project funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, HRK-EXPERTISE Internationalisation, builds on experience gained in the HRK Audit and aims to further develop the internationalisation of universities while focussing on quality and to integrate internationalisation into all dimensions of higher education activities. Recently developed formats – topic workshops, process workshops,
round tables and peer-to-peer – address specific aspects of internationalisation in dialogue with a university’s relevant stakeholders and in a manner responsive to their needs. Internationalisation mainstreaming, linking internationalisation and digitisation, the internationalisation of degree programmes and advisory services and also recruiting measures for international early career researchers and students emerged as key topics.

One of the HRK’s established formats is the Global University Leaders Council Hamburg, held for the second time in 2017, to which the HRK, together with the Körber Foundation and the Universität Hamburg, invited the presidents of around 50 research universities from six continents. Key topics for discussion at the meeting were the impacts of the trend towards academisation and threats to academic freedom.

The HRK has long been putting its commitment to development policy into practice through the Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies (DIES). The programme, developed jointly by the DAAD and the HRK, offers a package of measures – training courses, dialogue events, projects and partnerships – through which universities in the Global South can align their training courses with international quality standards, expand their research capacities and develop their organisational structures. The management of universities in developing and emerging nations was the focus of an international DIES conference in 2017.

Finally, the HRK focussed its attention on the topic of teaching. A current HRK recommendation endorsed the systematic internationalisation of curricula in all subject areas in order to enable all students to continually explore international and intercultural teaching contents during their university courses in Germany.

The HRK information portal “International university partnerships” documents the high degree of international networking by German universities. The website offers up-to-date information in German and English on over 33,000 agreements that exist between German universities and partner institutions in around 150 foreign countries. www.international-university-partnerships.de
In a landmark resolution in response to the imminent crisis of the European Union, the HRK stated in 2016 that "European universities see themselves more clearly than ever as a stronghold of the European Idea and a global mind-set" and as a "crucial pillar of a dynamically developing European civil and knowledge society." This strong claim is built on the observation that universities represent ground-breaking research, high-quality teaching and cutting-edge innovation. In short, they represent the EU "innovation triangle" comprehensively, unmatched by any other institution in civil society. Even beyond, universities are keepers of cultural achievements and hubs of critical thinking. Located all over Europe and connected by the mobility of students and researchers inherent to research and higher education, universities safeguard and transmit European values and the idea of a diverse and yet closely connected Europe.

The German Rectors' Conference (HRK) has built on this key concept for several years now, deducing several policy positions from it and establishing university activities in the (extended) knowledge triangle as the overarching HRK EU leitmotif. The positions stated by the HRK in its dialogue with all relevant players include the demand to make EU-wide ‘distributed excellence’ a fundamental building block of any policy activity, to stress the universities’ linking function between the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Research Area (ERA) and to advocate for multi-level funding support for European universities from the EU, member states, and regions appropriate for the essential role of universities.

To implement the aforementioned principles, the HRK maintains a continuous policy dialogue with universities and other national rector’s conferences in Europe, on a bilateral level and in the realm of the European University Association (EUA). Together with these allies, the HRK has recently put a strong emphasis on the pilot phase of the new EU university network programme, lobbying for the inclusion of all sides of the triangle, appropriate funding, and a true bottom up approach.

Comparable activities are targeted at the design phase of the upcoming 9th EU Framework Programme for Research and Innovation (2021–2027) for which the HRK advocates excellence as the relevant benchmark, a science-driven content, and a cooperation-oriented structure to ensure the European added value.

Concerning teaching and study, the HRK supports the "shift from teaching to learning" stipulated by the Bologna Process. Thus, the HRK participates in a range of European projects that aim at improving academic recognition and promote pedagogical reforms, such as Mastermind Europe, Focus on Automatic Institutional Recognition (FAIR) and the European Forum for Enhanced Cooperation in Teaching and Learning (EFFECT).
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Editors:
Carolin Brühl
Stephan Keuck
Susanne Schilden
Marijke Wahlers
Nils Wörner

Leipziger Platz 11
10117 Berlin

Ahrstraße 39
53175 Bonn

Rue d’Alsace-Lorraine 44
1050 Brussels

Phone: +49 30 206292-11
Fax: +49 30 206292-15
Email: post@hrk.de
www.hrk.de

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oneword GmbH, Böblingen
www.oneword.de

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www.theoffice.de

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