

**Words of Welcome by the
President
of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation,
Professor Dr Hans-Christian Pape,
on the occasion of the New Year's Reception
18 January 2018, 6 pm, BBAW, Berlin**

- Check against delivery -

Dear Minister of State Böhmer,
Your Excellencies, members of the German Bundestag,
Representatives of Federal and State Ministries, universities and research institutions,
Humboldtians,
Friends of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I am both very pleased and extremely honoured to welcome you here today as President of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

I am assuming the office of Humboldt President at a time when the science system in Germany is continuing its highly-dynamic development. Policy-makers have laid important foundations for reinforcing Germany's status as a science location and enhancing its international visibility even more. The Excellence Strategy, the Higher Education Pacts, the 1,000 Professors Programme, the actions to promote international exchange are all important incentives that open up attractive, albeit necessary, pathways. In this particularly exciting phase, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation is making significant contributions to promoting the internationalisation of excellent science; but in this dynamic environment the Humboldt Foundation, too, must and, indeed, wants to mark out pathways of its own.

You, State Minister Böhmer, have formulated your expectations and those of your ministry, for which I should like to thank you and assure you that the Humboldt Foundation will develop, will raise its profile, will emphasise its unique features and, in close alliance with you and other departments, will fulfil its function as a role model in foreign science policy. A subject to which I will return.

First of all, however, the concept of the role model is very important to me. And here I look to my predecessor, Helmut Schwarz. Dear Helmut Schwarz: in the last ten years you have given a face to the Humboldt Foundation and, together with the staff at headquarters and all the commissions, have shaped and developed the Foundation.

“Helmut Schwarz - for the Humboldt Foundation Helmut Schwarz has been nothing less than a stroke of luck” – that is what I keep reading everywhere, and, from my own experience I strongly agree. It was at the annual meeting 2008 – your first annual meeting as President, dear Mr. Schwarz, and mine as freshly selected Max-Planck-Humboldt-Award winner. I remember the festivities in the garden of Schloss Bellevue vividly. President Köhler and yourself – or shall I better say – you and President Köhler, in the middle of thousand scientists and scholars and their families, very colourful, very lively, from all over the world – a true moment of international harmony. That is science. You, dear Mr. Schwarz, will be a role model for me, too, and for being this role model, I should like to thank you most warmly.

Ladies and gentlemen, role models are a reference, a standard against which people can measure and evaluate their actions and extrapolate the consequences. “A grand example rouses emulation and raises judgment to a higher standard,” writes Friedrich Schiller in his *Wallenstein* trilogy¹. Alexander von Humboldt is just such a role model, for an excellent scientist, a gifted teacher and a dedicated intermediary between cultures. In its sponsorship philosophy, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation follows his example and his principles, and in the process, develops its own character as a role model. This, at least, was the conclusion drawn by the Science Council in its 2013 evaluation and 2017 appraisal. As a member and chair of the Science Council’s Scientific Commission at the time, I know these reports very well indeed. What has remained with me is the excellent recognition accorded to the Humboldt Foundation for its unparalleled contribution to internationalising science and its unique feature of promoting top-level research by sponsoring the individuals who conduct it: to promote the researchers, their creativity and their international networking is the core objective of Humboldt sponsorship – one result is the world-spanning Humboldt Network with more than 28,000 hubs (the Humboldtians), based on long-term collaboration which seeks to strengthen Germany’s science and reinforce its reputation by means of a lasting relationship. Our alumni maintain their collaborations with Germany, take their positive experiences of the country away with them and act as intermediaries and multipliers in academia and society.

¹ Schiller, *Wallenstein* (Trilogy), 1796-1799; first printed 1800. Prologue, 1798

But even a role model has to address influences and developments; it must develop itself, particularly if it is to retain its function as a role model. After all, Sigmund Freud² also pointed out that two of the decisive criteria for a role model to function are attractiveness and success. What does this mean for the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and what does it mean for its funders? On this, four points:

1. We have to remain attractive in the face of global developments that witness changing individual concepts of life, needs and expectations. I should like to mention two relevant aspects. The one is that the basis of sponsorship, the fellowships, must be retained; they offer the high degree of flexibility that is required, should, however, be tailored even better to individual needs with additional benefits for pension plans included and, for this purpose, embedded in a modular sponsorship framework. The other is that, for years, we have registered growing numbers of applications: interest in Humboldt sponsorship and academic exchange with Germany is increasing. Terrific, at first sight! But with the number of fellowships remaining static, the consequence is that approval rates are dropping. Once again: fine, provided this goes hand in hand with stricter selection of the best. There is, however, a critical threshold when it comes to selection and funding chances, and falling below it dramatically reduces the attractiveness of the offer – and you will recall: a role-model must be attractive and successful. We have to remain attractive, update the basis of sponsorship, customise the fellowships and increase the numbers.
2. We have to hold our own against growing competition for creative minds. Here, too, it is worth focusing briefly on two aspects: The one is that creative spirits love to be wooed, directly and indirectly. And creative spirits also appreciate foresight and predictability. As popular wisdom has it, “A creative person is particularly productive when he knows himself and his needs really well.” So, what we need to do is to recruit the best, offer individual sponsorship, make speedy decisions, and map out the stages on the path leading on from Humboldt sponsorship – a key word in this context is linkage with structured career paths in the host country or at home.
3. We have to adjust to a change in the geography of knowledge. In some countries, the speed of global development is leading to a new situation in academia, society and politics. We can all think of examples. These changes generate opportunities and challenges, but also obligations. We need to define countries where we want to increase our programme marketing, gain the cooperation of top potentials and reinforce research structures. We also need to identify countries where the freedom of science and research is under threat. The Philipp Schwartz Initiative is an

² Sigmund Freud: *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 1921

example of an alliance of policy-makers, universities and the Humboldt Foundation in supporting researchers at risk. The role of the Humboldt Foundation cannot and will not be that of an elite headhunter, poaching scientific potential from crisis areas and transition countries. Our sponsorship must envisage researchers returning to their own institutions and thus pave the way for these elites to help structure or reconstruct their countries. It will be crucial to systematically map science, where it is developing and where it is in danger in order to be able to recognise opportunities and challenges in advance and act appropriately. I think the internationalization of science is an important point in any coalition discussion.

4. Ladies and gentlemen, at this point allow me to discuss tendencies that invoke science itself as a role model or, indeed, question this role model itself. I am talking about the rise of populists, the decline in the importance of facts, the frequently negative attitude to anything and anyone foreign, the hostile stereotypes. These are worrying tendencies in many countries and, increasingly, in societies which long seemed immune to such infiltration and pathological derailment. In this situation, science can and must take on an extended role. In our collaborative society, science is responsible for providing the best possible knowledge available. Therefore, it lays the foundations for critical reflexion on issues relating to society, culture and development. Science generates international networks which efficiently integrate Germany in coalitions, even in *ad hoc* coalitions, which assume the role previously played by global organisational forms. It brings people together in a climate of exchange between equals and thus engenders trust. The scientific community, however, constantly has work for that trust, and thus has to revoke itself from populist undermining. This will only succeed if, as it was rightly pointed out by the president of the DFG, Peter Strohschneider, in his New Year's speech 2017: "that science has to be conducted responsibly ... that scientists don't understand themselves as the keepers of truth but rather as those who rationally and methodically seek the truth."³ Dear ladies and gentlemen, the quality of scientific research, the trustworthiness of those, who gain and support this knowledge, and the respectability of this promise to society are not negotiable – and here I include the individual as well as the institutional constituents.

The Foreign Minister Gabriel once noted that Germany had developed from what was once a country of fear and anxiety into a country of longing. As a citizen of this country, I can only exclaim, that's great, and would merely like to make two supplementary points. As a

³ Rede des DFG-Präsidenten, Prof. Dr. Peter Strohschneider, anlässlich der Festveranstaltung im Rahmen der Jahresversammlung der Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft 2017 am 4. Juli in Halle (Saale): Über Wissenschaft in Zeiten des Populismus.

neurophysiologist and with the confidence of a researcher, I would add: We learn from role models and know well enough how learning can be explained in physiological terms. As an anxiety researcher I also know that the unknown often generates diffuse fears. The cause is to be found in regions of the brain that are linked in evolutionary terms to the old instinctive and emotional spheres. We can overcome these fears by training other regions of the brain that control these old functions. And this is done, essentially, by learning from **role models** which guide us to new experience and evaluation patterns. As President of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, I should like to add: Our Foundation is a role model of this kind; in an exemplary fashion it stands for the linkage of internationality, science and society, and, as you have described, it makes a significant contribution to the development of our country's reputation.]

Ladies and gentlemen, friends of the Humboldt Foundation, after this brief digression, one further aspect of the role model should still be discussed here and now: High-profile role models are attractive and effective. The Humboldt Foundation has the highest reputation, both nationally and internationally. Its sponsorship is extremely effective and sustainable, and it is based on the fundamental idea of humanity, in accordance with the default attitude of its eponym Alexander von Humboldt. "The idea of humanity is the endeavour to remove the borders that prejudices and one-sided views of all kinds have hostilely raised between people and to treat the whole of humanity, irrespective of religion, nation and colour as ... an ... existing whole."⁴ The Alexander von Humboldt Foundation is a good role model – it is attractive, successful and effective. Our success is inseparably connected to the support of our partners in science and politics. I thank you very much. It is worth emulating this role model but also constantly developing it and constantly promoting this development.

Thank you for your attention.

⁴ Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos*, Vol. 1, 1845, p. 385 and p. 187. Quoted by Frank Holl (ed.): *Alexander von Humboldt, Es ist ein Treiben in mir*, Munich 2009, p. 72.

