

# OPEN SPACE TO THINK AND RESEARCH – THIS IS WHEN UNIVERSITY HAPPENS!



*A conversation with the head of the FRIAS steering committee and former Science Minister of Baden-Württemberg, Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. mult. Peter Frankenberg*

*FRIAS: Prof. Frankenberg, as someone who has committed himself to higher education support: has the excellence initiative proven its worth?*

**Frankenberg:** Well, since I have been involved in the development of the excellence initiative I cannot give a neutral statement, but I would claim, that we had been more successful than we would have hoped in the beginning. I would say, yes, it has proven its worth; this has also been shown by the evaluations of the German Science Council (Wissenschaftsrat) and the German research Foundation (DFG). The main goals of the initiative were the promotion of specific research areas at the universities, more collaboration with institutions outside the universities, increased visibility of German Universities and enhanced attractiveness for international researchers. These goals have been reached quite successfully in a short amount of time

– and with relatively few resources, if one compares the financing with the budget of international top universities. Outside of Germany the excellence initiative was well received because it supported the leading universities and made them more visible.

*FRIAS: The excellence initiative also means a distinction between successful and less successful universities. Do these reputational losses stand in relation to the intended goals?*

**Frankenberg:** From my point of view, the competition had a different effect: it gave impetus to a process of self-contemplation and self-positioning of the universities. The universities had to decide where they set their priorities, if they could be successful with graduate schools or clusters of excellence, and where their strength and weaknesses lie. Other universities could see clearly that they could not succeed in this competition, but then aimed to strengthen their regional presence. In this respect, the excellence initiative has resulted in a process of self-identification that can be seen as highly positive. The fact that the universities preoccupied themselves intensively with their own institution, is within itself already a great success.

*FRIAS: Are the university managements today sufficiently capable of seeing through, shaping and enduring such strategic positioning?*

**Frankenberg:** You have raised an important point that has already been criticised in the report and the rec-

ommendation of the science council. There are major shortcomings regarding the autonomy and steering capacity of the universities. There must be a balance between academic freedom, for instance represented by the senate, and the leadership of the rectorate and the university council. The university management, has to be able to implement strategic decisions. The same applies to other issues, such as a bigger flexibility of the personnel structure and the capacity to plan, build and finance construction projects for universities. I would even find the creditworthiness of universities useful, since many universities would currently be able to sort their infrastructure problems in the capital market. But rectorates don't have such an autonomy, and cannot – least because of this – compete with the international competition.

*FRIAS: Now there are countries such as Great Britain with a more market oriented, competitive model of universities, with high tuition fees, but also more autonomy for their institutions. Would you recommend to pursue this course in order to overcome German reform deadlocks?*

**Frankenberg:** This degree of autonomy for universities is visible in most Anglo-Saxon systems, also in Australia and South Africa. It indeed serves as a role model. What I consider less exemplary is the financing. I am a firm supporter of tuition fees but there is a limit where tuition fees might have a prohibitive effect, which makes access to higher education for large parts of the population impossible. Great Britain has passed this threshold already a long time ago

– which in some cases might lead to admissions that are not purely based on the quality of the application. There is a second issue that I perceive very critical: in Great Britain, priority is given to the „impact“ of education and research, meaning the societal and economic benefits of research. This is done at the expense of basic research, which of course affects applied research in the longer term. I am grateful that the excellence initiative does not focus on specific *a priori* profitable scientific areas. This is one aspect of the British example that I feel we should not follow.

*FRIAS: Conversely, can it be claimed that a science-friendly consensus prevails in German politics?*

**Frankenberg:** Indeed there is, however, this varies from state to state. In Baden-Wuerttemberg politics and society are very science-friendly, from the basic position that this high-tech-„Ländle“ (state) depends on smart people. Actually we always had state premiers that considered research and the development of higher education as priorities in national politics. Another advantage that Baden-Wuerttemberg has is the great continuity of university policies. Big discontinuities were avoided as far as possible. Thanks to the commitment to science and a policy without significant disruption, universities were able to thrive. In my view this is only comparable to Bavaria. Hence, it is not surprising that in all comparisons - DFG-statistics, excellence initiative, Humboldt-Awards etc. – those two southern states are ranked highly. This also includes non-university research in-

stitutes such as the Max-Planck- and the Fraunhofer-Institute, which are located to a large extent in southern Germany. I do not see this science-friendliness in all German states.

*FRIAS: Coming back to the relationship between science and politics: is there a sufficient dialogue between science and politics? Does science react adequately to societal issues?*

**Frankenberg:** I believe this is dependent on the subject. First of all, in times where nearly 50 percent of an age group are studying, the societal participation is much more diverse than before. And this can barely be achieved otherwise. Concerning the question, if science takes the interest from social stakeholders sufficiently into account, I would be more cautious. The question is how to open up the universities for a world beyond science. Here, the university councils come into play, since they carry the outside view into the universities.

*FRIAS: If we now consider this again for the humanities and social sciences: it is claimed that they are of great importance in times of increased populism – nevertheless, they have been confronted with significant cutbacks. In a way they are obliged to prove their „profitableness“.*

**Frankenberg:** I am rather skeptical in this regard. Why are the humanities always called into question? Of course it is also about the demand of what kind of contribution they can make to the discourse, for example between technology and society or other areas. But the way to legitimize

themselves by creating ever more new subject foci, is in my view the wrong approach. Since they are part of our culture, the humanities and social sciences should be supported independently of their usefulness and functionality. There are so many fields where it is not possible to foresee what may come from them. Let us take the example of archeology: as a result of its dialogue with biology and anthropology, new insights may be found, for example about the settlement in Europe.

*FRIAS: Speaking of interdisciplinary teamwork – it has been widely discussed whether the disciplines nowadays are over-specialized and if the interdisciplinary dialogue should be supported more – or, whether the disciplines remain the place for innovations after all. What is your perspective on this?*

**Frankenberg:** Looking at science today, like the influence of most subjects with informatics, mathematics or in the case of medicine with questions concerning genetics, molecular biology, the functioning of cells, and even in the humanities with their numeric models – interdisciplinarity is absolutely essential. Of course also the specialization of individual fields strongly increased, which means that there is a need for enhanced communication in the faculties. We have to create an atmosphere at the universities, where one is interested in what the research of other colleagues is about and what is happening outside the university. One may facilitate this with certain instruments, but in the end this cannot be implemented top-down.

Which brings us straight back to the FRIAS: this Institute creates space for encounters and brings people together, without structural overload.

*FRIAS: You are the chairman of the FRIAS-steering committee since July 2015. Why have you decided to support the Institute?*

**Frankenberg:** For me this is something fundamental. FRIAS creates an open space to think and research – this is where university happens! In this respect spatial proximity is of great importance. This is where a community can thrive – which is reflected in the success of FRIAS publications, applications, awards etc. In some way an institution like FRIAS embodies the exact essence of a living university: concentration, exchange and curiosity.

*FRIAS: Prof. Frankenberg, thank you very much for the interview.*