

Speech by the President of TU Braunschweig, Professor Angela Ittel, on the occasion of the inauguration on 2 September 2021

Dear ...

Lord Mayor Markurth

- Minister Thümler
- Mr Ressel
- Mr Hageböling
- Ms Ammann and
- Mr Kienel
- dear Colleagues, dear Students
- dear Ladies and Gentlemen in the hall and the audience in the stream

It is a great honour for me to be able to speak to you here today, and in your presence—be it here in this hall or via livestream—to be officially inaugurated as President of your—indeed our—University. It is an act that carries great weight both for me in a tangible and for the University in a symbolic sense. The chain, an artefact as a symbol of the office, has great significance for the institution, regardless of the requirements placed on a modern university president, and regardless of the desire for modern leadership styles. A significance that reflects the responsibility that is linked to the office.

I am therefore glad that, despite adverse circumstances—circumstances that we all wish were different—we can come together here today to mark this symbolic handing-over of office. It illustrates the great trust you have placed in me. Of which I am aware. But of course, I am also aware of the responsibility. I would like to maintain the humility with respect to this office. I take it very seriously and I would like to express my gratitude once again at this point.

What motivates me?

In my work I am driven by the vision of guiding TU Braunschweig on its way to becoming an institution of research and education that thinks globally. TU Braunschweig is a university that has understood that a successful university must address current global challenges in research and teaching quickly. It is a university that is agile and dynamic. It is aware of its firm roots in the region and cooperates closely with regional partners. At the same time, it wants to be a cosmopolitan, non-discriminatory institution that offers international partners the best possible conditions. And—with its firm roots in the local community—it wants to reach even higher and further out into the world and continuously strengthen and expand its successful cooperation with international partners.

I have presented the vision I have developed on various occasions over the past few months. I would like to do it again here: A TU Braunschweig as a university that is the driving force behind the development of the region, that acts as a strong partner in alliances, that is a research university with global visibility, that unconditionally supports interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research, humanitarian values and academic freedom, and that strives to achieve excellence in all areas day by day.

The goal of this path must be that we want our entire University to shine, with all its facets—to not only highlight the showcase projects, but also to communicate our overall strengths clearly and, above all, confidently, and to exploit our potential for development together and with optimism. This makes us an attractive partner on a global level. This is the basis for holistic excellence. We can only achieve this together.

That is something I would like to emphasise in particular, because in assessing the success, but especially also the failures of universities, people like to talk about and judge the president alone. Of course, there are good reasons for this: After all, the person at the head of the university has knowingly assumed overall responsibility for the university's path. Nevertheless—and you will agree with me—such a perspective does not do justice to the many stakeholders who are actively involved in the development of the university. What is needed is a strong community and many colleagues, staff members and students who work together towards agreed goals, who value the strengths and expertise of the other members and who deal with their weaknesses in a constructive manner. This is necessary to shape the holistic development of a university. I would like to support this community, I would like to give impulses so that we empower all members to help shape and take responsibility for the development of TU Braunschweig.

I want to lead in a visionary yet integrative way and act as decisively as I do pragmatically. In doing so, I always place the greatest value on collegial and participative management both within the Executive Board and together with all members of the University. The University benefits from ways of negotiation that are transparent and based on equal opportunities. A clear agreement on the implementation of common goals is always part of the path.

Many will already know that I put a strong focus on internationalisation, diversity and equality. And of course, it also has to do with my years as a student in the USA, where I not only studied and did my doctorate, but was able to spend almost 11 years of my life. Internationalisation, diversity and equality are concepts that are or should be a lived reality of a university in order to root diversity in research, teaching, studies and administration. Concepts on which we—on which all universities—must continuously act in order to enable holistic excellence. One never reaches the goal, but one has to keep working towards it, and always combine the development of these concepts with the process of self-reflection, always be open and always find the strength for revision and renewal.

I learned this from scratch—not only abroad. And this very defining experience allows me, or rather makes it my duty, to always bring in a bit of the outsider's perspective or the so-called "bird's eye view" here at home as well—being an "external hire" in more ways than one (1 x from Berlin and 1 x as someone who "grew up" in the USA). These experiences help me not only to be courageous, but also to put pending decisions into perspective, to weigh the pros and cons, and—if sensible and appropriate—to seek new paths.

TU Braunschweig has clearly placed a high value on this perspective by electing an external president for the second time now. For this, one cannot be thankful and feel proud enough.

The customs and traditions of an institution should and must be considered. However, they should never be the sole deciding factor for decisions about future developments. After all, we want to actively shape change—otherwise things change anyway and we just run after them. And I would like to emphasise once again that I see my role as President first and foremost in defining the goals of a university on behalf of the Senate, on behalf of all members, against the background of my experience and expertise, and in ensuring that they are implemented.

What is the meaning of a university?

I probably don't need to persuade anyone here, we should quickly come to an agreement that university education and research is important and makes a highly significant contribution to our society, to our economy and to each and every one of us. The educational path—as many studies have shown—makes a decisive difference: in the development of skills, in the ability and willingness to reflect, for economic security and for the contribution that each and every one of us can make to the well-being of our society and democracy. Science and research is not only the basis for technical innovation and social cohesion, it saves lives. This becomes particularly evident in times of crisis, when we have to go beyond our personal limits to master challenges.

The global challenges of the present time, of the recent past, but also of the future—for society and universities, for politics and research—are currently being discussed in many places. I do not need to describe them at length here.

The current series of crises and challenges may seem particularly challenging to many. Climate, Covid, floods in the Ahr Valley, Afghanistan. One could and indeed may think that we no longer get out of crisis mode at all in order to draw new strength.

But it is precisely then that we should keep a clear head. The underlying issues or aspects of many crises are of an acute nature—but perhaps they are only concomitants of the long-term developments that are actually of serious and profound significance here at the University. Energy supply and thus also environmental pollution, overconsumption and, as an all-encompassing theme, sustainability are certainly among the mega topics that will keep us busy in the long term. So are networking, advancing technologisation and mechanisation, which so many here are researching comprehensively and at an excellent level. Education itself—for example under the buzzword artificial intelligence—also belongs in the series. All these topics are eternal food for thought, but they are also currently prominently visible in an era of radical change.

Understanding and tackling such issues requires the clearest possible scientific and engineering mind. Tackling them also requires close cooperation here with each other and between research and educational institutions in the country and at national and international levels. The culture of community, of togetherness, is becoming increasingly important. This is something that we, that each and every one of us, can cultivate and promote.

I would also like to advocate that scepticism is not the order of the day here, that there should not be concern about universities competing with each other, that institutions should not be pitted against each other. Competition of ideas is always a good thing, the open exchange of views and opinions—but at the same time, we as an institution must be able and willing to cooperate if we want to be successful.

A joint, diversity-focused and equality-oriented design of research projects and holistic university education is a key factor here. It is necessary in order to evolve—as people, as a society, as a political and economic entity. Here in the region—and with increasing importance and urgency—also on a national and global level.

This goes far beyond the laboratory, the seminar room, the lecture hall, the digital Webex conference, where we generate, communicate and critically reflect on knowledge.

Inter- and transdisciplinary research across institutes, flexible joint teaching formats, innovative instruments of knowledge exchange, integration of lifelong learning opportunities for all members at a university, flexible working conditions, equality, diversity, internationalisation and much more are not only side effects of excellent engineering science in this scenario of great challenges. Viable concepts in these areas offer us the chance to achieve holistic excellence beyond the mere competence of finding solutions and fulfilling tasks. Without them, we can no longer rely on achieving competitive results on a global scale. Without them, we can no longer expect to remain an excellent university.

In this way, the culture of our University—the University Culture—is becoming more and more important. Because the values, attitudes, goals and behaviours define the boundaries of that culture and thus also the boundaries of the University, or, on the contrary, enable a progress that transcends borders. And therefore, we have to ask ourselves again and again: Have we developed a culture at our University that enables us to act in community and to strive together for development, to achieve our goals together and to reach global visibility and success?

And that sounds like having high aspirations, but I only dare to talk about them because I am not only the President of this University by now. In the meantime, thanks to meeting impressive people, the fantastically organised visits to the faculties and centres, and the many conversations, I am also its biggest fan.

In all these conversations I have had so far, I have experienced great openness and curiosity. And I have sensed your great desire to continue to develop TU Braunschweig on its successful course and to shape it together. I was particularly struck by how naturally united the University acts and how powerfully it can act on this basis. I can assure you from experience that this is not something that can be taken for granted. It encourages and motivates me to believe that together with you, we can make a difference here. That is something I am very much looking forward to.

The palpable unity, the will to shape the University and the common goals form the basis of a contemporary participatory university design that I represent with conviction. Participative university design also means delegating responsibility to all members, and also that all members actively take on responsibility. An excellent example is how quickly we were able to respond to the recent refugee crisis. Within days, we had set up and communicated a concept that addresses and supports the people who

recently had to flee their home country of Afghanistan, in order to offer them a home, a perspective. Thankfully, the city is also very active in this regard. Special thanks go to our Lord Mayor Mr Markurth and his teams, Ms Hesse and Mr Leppa for working together so effectively! Of course, this is only ONE example of the excellent work that is being done here. I have experienced a lot of openness recently and an enormous speed at which the agreed goals are implemented.

Collaboration is not only vital within but also across institutions. Close cooperation with universities in the country or globally does not mean that one abandons one's identity and that one cuts the ground from under other universities' feet. Rather, we can see that the principle of cooperation, mutual provision of strengths and open communication about goals, development potentials and plans are not done out of necessity, but are in fact enriching in order to achieve our goals. Dear Volker, dear colleague Epping, I am very glad that I do not have to have the slightest doubt that we both actively support the strengthening of this cooperation between our universities and that we have also received very positive signals from many other colleagues here in the State about strengthening cooperation. Football clubs or not. We—that is, the universities of the State—should and will lead the way here as a shining example of exemplary cooperation between our campuses. I am convinced that this is the only way for a successful university in a high-tech country to be truly successful in mastering the global challenges that we must not, cannot and do not want to dodge.

We can only shape the present and, above all, the future in this way. We have to shape it this way. We may only shape it this way! This University is a wonderful place to do so.

But implementation requires consistency and patience. And it requires that, despite all the clear changes in the process, one has to keep looking inwards and create structures that allow this to happen. This is important to ensure that the people here, the members of the University, can pursue the same goals together. And it is necessary so that it becomes apparent what support they need to achieve the common goals.

I have been working here since 1 July, so at the time of today's symbolic assumption of office I have already been in office for 60 days. That may seem a little unusual for the date of handing-over of office—but one advantage is that I have already been able to gain many impressions. The first 100 days are meant for listening, learning, getting to know each other, having conversations and reflecting, making plans. Even before taking office, many colleagues—especially my colleague Ms Koch, who had been so successfully entrusted with the tasks of the President for 9 months—gave me an insight into the current main topics. Shortly after arriving, I have benefited from wonderfully organised tours of the faculties and the Administration. The shining eyes of people who enthusiastically report on their work—no matter in which area—are the necessary basis, the best impetus, for my, for our joint efforts.

I was thus able to quickly get to grips with the subject matter here and transform from President-elect into the biggest fan—or perhaps more accurately—the most loyal “critical friend” of this University. Even though the first 100 days are not yet over, we have already been able to make some ground-breaking plans or to even prepare their implementation. In addition to the current challenge of university financing, dear Mr Thümler, in addition to the permanent tasks of coping with the pandemic and the urgent digitisation, I see the areas of activity of internationalisation, equality, diversity and the strengthening of transfer activities, or the expansion of the concept of transfer, as being particularly in the foreground.

Thankfully, I have also been able to spend a lot of time with my colleagues on the Executive Board. I deliberately and gladly decided to continue working with the existing Executive Board and to use the time to discuss in detail whether our goals are compatible and how we can best lead TU Braunschweig in this constellation. Because even though I am the focus of attention here today as President, this office and especially the success in this office is not exclusively about me, but about us, about the performance and the creative will of all colleagues on the Executive Board and all members of TU Braunschweig.

What is in store for us?

The implementation on the future path to holistic excellence requires a strong Executive Board that performs its tasks in a transparent and collegial manner and that takes research and diversity into account. But it also requires a good balance and the closest possible cooperation between central and decentralised units. Only through transparency and trust will we achieve the cultural change towards holistic excellence. To motivate and to encourage change must be our daily goal. This includes consistency and patience, effective internal communication and a deliberate willingness to cooperate and negotiate, as well as a solid conception of ourselves both inside the organisation and vis-à-vis external and, above all, international partners.

In order to be even more effective here, we have already been thinking about and making plans over the past few weeks, which we will begin to implement together with the faculties and the Administration in the autumn. Many thanks on behalf of all of us to you, dear Mr Thümler, and your Ministry for your support in this respect.

Allow me to address something to you, dear Minister, dear Mr Thümler: Of course, above all stands the hope, the demand on the State to commit itself to not weakening the universities in the long term, but to strengthening them. But instead, substantial cuts are not only being discussed, but they are being openly and clearly demanded by politicians. We at TU Braunschweig have read about this, discussed about this and raged about this in recent months—and we already have to act on it. This has been described to me very vividly earlier. However, what I have learnt in conversations with you and your responsible colleagues is that there is a great openness and the doors are wide open for constructive suggestions and that there is also interest in supporting us in the best possible way. In the meantime, I am confident that we will succeed in establishing good cooperation if we manage to keep the lines of communication open and trust that the primary goal is not only to ensure that the universities in Lower Saxony remain efficient, but also to strengthen them holistically, as circumstances require.

First and foremost, we have to fulfil our tasks, always under the premise of moving forward and achieving holistic excellence—not just with the motivation of winning the next competition. That alone will not be enough, that would not get us anywhere.

Many colleagues are reaching out to me to actively contribute to these efforts. One thing I can already say from the bottom of my heart is that it is a pleasure working here with you.

Thank you for listening!