



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
to students in Germany at the start of the
2021 summer semester
in Berlin
on 12 April 2021**

Honoured students at the Staatsbibliothek in Berlin and throughout Germany, for all of you the summer semester has begun in the past few days. This summer semester of 2021 is already the third semester during the pandemic, the third in which the universities are closed, the third during which almost all teaching will be done digitally. I don't suppose any of you would have imagined a year ago what this would mean for your studies. And even if there is now hope after this fearfully long year, hope inspired primarily by the vaccination campaign that is now tangibly picking up speed, we must first ride out the third wave of this disease.

I am very glad to be here today, on this magnificently restored staircase at the Staatsbibliothek in its building on Unter den Linden in Berlin. Let me thank you, Ms Schneider-Kempf, for making this occasion possible, even if we would have preferred it to take a different form, for it to have been held in a large hall, attended by as many students as possible, enlivened by a discussion with all those present.

Instead, only a few of you are here with me on this staircase – with large spaces between us. The vast majority of you are watching on your screens. The frank and lively exchange that I would have liked to conduct in a large group after my speech will instead involve just a few of you. And the library at the top of the stairs, this cradle of knowledge, is closed, as are most libraries in Germany.

Perhaps this is a good metaphor for your situation. You are, like so many other young people in our country, at a crucial stage of your lives. You are in education. This is a stage during which people normally storm ahead, up the stairs, out into life, taking two or even three steps at a time.

But you now have to sit tight. Far apart from each other. And mostly in front of your screens. You are stuck on the career ladder, or the ladder of your lives, and are wondering where it will lead. Up? Or down? You feel as if your plans and your lives have been put on hold – that’s what I’ve been told by young people, by the schoolchildren, the students and the trainees I have spoken to frequently and repeatedly, especially in the past months and weeks.

The pandemic is particularly hard on you, the young people who our country so desperately needs for its future. And yet your worries, your problems, I could even say your distress, are not what the TV talkshows and the countless daily special bulletins focus on. In the mistaken expectation that this pandemic would soon be over, we as a society have perhaps paid too little attention to what this sudden rent in time, this being on hold, means for young people who are full of energy and enthusiasm at the start of the lives – at the foot of the stairs, as it were.

We assumed that things would somehow work out in these difficult times, in the universities too. And it’s true, all of you, the university administrative and teaching staff, and the students, have moved mountains this past year. You have managed to provide almost all the usual teaching, in spite of the difficulties, although almost all of it had to be adapted for digital delivery, as were examinations. That required – and continues to require – tremendous efforts on the part of all involved. I explicitly include in this number the universities’ administrative and technical staff, whose work is normally conducted out of sight, but who are absolutely essential in such exceptional situations. I would like to take this opportunity today to thank you all for your dedication.

But even so, there were various difficulties that could not be overcome – it is not only in politics that we find sticking points; our universities, too, were not all properly equipped for the digital age. They don’t have the necessary data capacities, they don’t have the facilities they need. Lab work and internships simply aren’t happening. Some of you, I am sure, will have missed a willingness to consider or permit the use of quick, unconventional work-arounds during the crisis.

The coronavirus crisis has shown up our country and our universities, too, revealing that we lack sufficient technical infrastructure and are hindered by too many rigid rules and a lack of flexibility. What must we learn from this? That we must make our country bolder and fitter for the future – and, as is the case in so many other fields, this ought to start in the universities!

I suspect, however, that for most of you, the principal insight after a year of digital study is how vital universities are as places to meet and exchange ideas with other people.

Wilhelm von Humboldt, the great Prussian scholar, whose ideas permeate our education system and our universities, was convinced that universities should be centres of learning and liberty. He was also convinced that teachers and students need a maximum of "solitude and freedom" to make universities the places he envisioned. After over a year, many of you are presumably thinking that you've had more solitude than ever before and less freedom than ever before – and enough is enough!

Universities are indeed public spaces. When they are closed, you miss them. But you are not alone. They are also missed by our democratic society. Many university towns, especially small towns, feel deserted now during the pandemic, and many of you feel well-nigh invisible in the locked-down world, swallowed up by the past. Indeed many of you are back home with your parents, perhaps even in your old childhood room.

I am confident that the universities will never be made superfluous or obsolete in their role as public spaces as a result of digitalisation! Even an infinite number of Zoom conferences can never replace studying in person, an essential part of which is built on active exchange with others. The reduction of universities to split screens, to video-conference tiles, to adapt the words of Berlin historian Paul Nolte, must not become the new normal.

It is not just the quality of education that suffers. So many other aspects of the student experience also fall by the wayside, things I can still remember from my own time at university in the 1970s. The quick chats with professors in the corridor after lectures, the spontaneous gatherings in the canteen, the heated political discussions at night in the pub, which somehow seemed to get merrier the longer they lasted. And above all the chance to satisfy your curiosity, to do things that weren't planned, that were off your core curriculum – a detour into history, a bit of philosophy, or architecture – or if I wanted to feel really stupid, a bit of biochemistry. You may wonder. But it's true – even law students like myself aren't always as streamlined and focused as you may think. And if you don't believe your fellow students from the law faculty, with their ironed trousers, then please believe your Federal President.

Of course we are feeling the adverse impact of this pandemic not only as students or staff. We are suffering as humans, as social beings. Most of you have complied with the contact restrictions with admirable discipline and consideration. You, young people, in particular, yearn to be with your friends, your families. You want to go out. You want to party, make music or take part in sporting activities together. You want to travel, to discover the world. You want to storm ahead!

But all that is gone. You miss it every day.

Also gone for the present are semesters abroad. If anyone says these are a luxury you can do without, let me tell them how important the experience is – for the people concerned and for the European idea! Open borders and exchange in science and research are the lifeblood of Europe. Europe lives from the fact that young people travel to other countries and experience other cultures. At present, it is also the case that far fewer foreign students are studying in Germany. They too are gone for the moment. In my opinion, this vital life experience should not be sacrificed to the pandemic. I think it would be a good thing for the EU to say this, and to assure you that you will be able to have your Erasmus experience at a later date without academic or financial disadvantage.

And on top of all of that, many of you have serious financial worries because the pandemic has deprived you of your jobs. The state has helped, has tried to cushion the blow with BAföG student grants, with emergency aid, and with financial support for the universities. All of that was and remains important. But, as I know, some people have had to abandon their studies anyway, and that worries me.

It is therefore no surprise to me that you are impatient to get back to normal, and that you are afraid. Afraid of not knowing how you will manage to graduate, how you can start your career, afraid of the future that awaits you after the pandemic.

You know as well as I do that the Federal President cannot provide quick and satisfying answers to most of these questions – but of this I will assure you: I understand your impatience, I understand your fears. The pandemic has had serious social and economic consequences for many of you; these are particularly harmful to those of you who have to overcome the greatest difficulties to study at all. We have to act faster – and with less red tape – to help all students who are suffering hardship because of the pandemic, as called for by our student services associations and others. It is positive to note that the Federal Government has at least extended its interim financial help to cover the 2021 summer semester.

However, my concern today is not only awareness of your situation. I also want to talk about what can be expected of society. The fact is that you, the young people, have shown enormous solidarity with the oldest members of our society and with those most vulnerable to the virus. You acted responsibly, and assumed responsibility. That, too, has been given too little recognition, and it is something I have tremendous respect for! My expectation is now as follows: it is now our turn, the older generation's turn, to show solidarity with you. Society must not turn a blind eye to how the young generation is to emerge from this crisis of a century. In my opinion, education belongs at the top of the agenda, even during a pandemic. If that cannot be guaranteed, it not

only makes life difficult for young people in the present, but it also does not bode well for the future.

Germany had become more advanced and certainly more attractive as a place to study in the years before the pandemic, thanks in part to major public investment. But we should be under no illusions. Just as society will be different after the pandemic, so too will higher education. After the coronavirus has been contained, universities will not be what they once were. High digital standards will be a lasting requirement, and in addition the universities will have to re-invent their on-site teaching and research. That will take a lot of energy and dedication – and above all money! In view of the vast public debt incurred as a result of fighting the pandemic, it might be politically tempting to save money on education and science. That's why it is all the more important for us to point out now how fatal that would be.

What do I mean when I speak of solidarity with the young generation? I, too, am well aware that we can't turn back the clock to recover the time you have lost to the pandemic. But we have to put the conditions in place to ensure you can get going again as soon as possible. Young people have told me time and again in the past weeks just how much they long for precisely that. Many people have told me that they won't be branded members of the so-called "corona generation". They accept that they have been slowed down, perhaps even thwarted in some of their aims. But they do not consider themselves to be a "lost" generation. That is not what they are, nor what they want to be. On the contrary, the future has never been as precious as it is now!

I am truly very impressed by this attitude. And I am above all impressed by the way this attitude informs your actions. Many of you have not just acted with solidarity during the crisis, but have been incredibly creative and inventive. You have worked on apps for better contact tracing, you have developed methods for manufacturing disinfectants, you have designed new face masks. You help out wherever help is needed. Students are, for example, working across the country in hospitals, vaccination centres and care homes. You are helping the elderly and refugees, you are serving food, and organising crowdfunding for foodbanks and the homeless – to name just a few of your activities. I am impressed by the way you are brimming with ideas, by your engagement and your energy. I am certain that we will need all these qualities in abundance if we are to master the pressing issues for the future after the pandemic.

You could say that it's easy for the Federal President to talk. And you'd be right. It's your dreams, your hopes, your desires, that keep being put on hold – and for some of you, they have perhaps already been deferred until some distant future.

But one thing I know for sure. Our companies, our public authorities, our schools, our universities and our hospitals need you! And

this is not just because the baby boomers are gradually retiring. You are needed precisely because of your experiences in this time of crisis. We need you! Our country needs you!

We need digital professionals who can network in an instant and adapt to new situations. We need engineers who can put together new technologies to slow down climate change and to develop the propulsion systems of the future. We need doctors and nurses to staff our healthcare system, to research new therapies for serious diseases and to be better prepared for the next pandemic. We need social scientists and experts in the humanities to analyse our society and where it's at, and to come up with ideas for its future. What form of coexistence do we want? How do we want to live, work and travel in a sustainable manner? We need architects, urban planners and sociologists to design the cities of the future. We need IT experts, programmers and physicists to further develop artificial intelligence in a responsible manner. More than ever, we need teachers and educators who help children and adolescents make the most of their educational opportunities – and who know how digital tools can sensibly be used to this end. These are just a few examples.

We need top-class innovative researchers and scientists, as this pandemic has made so very clear. Rarely has politics been so reliant on scientific evidence as in this crisis – and on scientific progress, in order to emerge from the crisis. Just what inspiring and outstanding achievements our researchers are capable of was demonstrated by Özlem Türeci and Uğur Şahin, who developed the first COVID-19 vaccine in Mainz. It was my pleasure to award them with the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany just a few weeks ago. To make what is apparently impossible possible – that was the goal that, according to Özlem Türeci, drove her, her husband and their entire team. That's what she said in Schloss Bellevue.

Making what is apparently impossible possible – that sounds very much like a nice phrase for a speech such as this today. But I fear that doing so will simply be a necessity in the years to come. Many of the major tasks to protect our future took a backseat during the pandemic, and I know how much that worries many of you. Urgent matters such as combating climate change and protecting key life resources cannot be postponed. They make it imperative for all of us to change the way we think, to boldly rethink our ways. In short, they make it imperative to make the apparently impossible possible.

Some of you listening to me now will, I am sure, be thinking "There in front of me is the Federal President, the supreme representative of the white-haired generation saying in a roundabout way, 'Sorry for making the present so hard for you young folks. And by the way, it's up to you to save the future!' That's not such a great deal, is it?"

And you know what? This point of view is not unjustified. I can't directly deny it. But I can at least try to give you another take on things. And that is my take as Federal President. All of us together face an uncertain future. The pandemic is a historic turning point, a caesura. The world, Europe, this country, this society – all will be different after the pandemic.

Many countries have been significantly worse hit by the pandemic and its consequences. They are fighting for their very survival. Here in Europe, in the Northern hemisphere, we are in a relatively privileged situation. We are working our way out of the pandemic. The road may be long and hard, but thanks to robust research and resilient healthcare and social security systems, it will bear the weight.

And yet we can tell even now that after the pandemic, some of the certainties we have lived with for decades will be gone. Just what our society will look like, or could look like, once the pandemic is over, is something not even a Federal President can predict with any precision. We are entering uncharted territory together.

But I do know one thing. If any generation is armed for this uncertain future, it is yours! For you have all learned something crucial at a young and formative age: you have been tried and tested by an emergency situation. That's how a friend, the head of a university, recently put it to me. You have lived through the test case – and you have, along with all the hardship and deprivation that still characterise your daily lives, learned something from this pandemic that is a key for the future. You have learned how vulnerable so-called individuality is, and how vulnerable we as a society are.

This experience might be a huge disappointment, a great insult to the individualism we have nurtured and cherished over the decades. But it could perhaps, from a long-term perspective, also be a salutary experience. It spells an end to the long-denigrated "hedonistic society" and people's endless "self-optimisation". In this respect too, the pandemic forms a break. Every day and every hour it reminds us that we do depend in the most existential way on each other, on the consideration shown to others and trust in each other. This experience will stay with you for the rest of your lives, and it can also shape the society of your future.

That is why – even in the midst of the third wave – my speech ends on a hopeful note. We are making progress. Vaccine deliveries are set to increase significantly in the coming weeks, production capacity in Europe is being expanded, and GPs are joining the vaccination campaign with gusto. The number of daily vaccinations reached a record high last week, and will continue to rise.

With each such day, we move a step closer to what is still a somewhat unreal post-corona future. The rulebook for this future is now

being written in the universities, as well as in society as a whole. And you are helping to write it!

I am therefore convinced that, precisely because of your experiences, good and bad, during the pandemic, your life will take you up a different staircase from the one you expected. But storm up it you will!

I look forward with you to that hopefully not so distant day when the campus will again be filled with young people from all over the world, when you can discuss things face-to-face in seminar rooms and when you can turn night into day in the clubs and bars of the city.

Things are not easy at the moment, but better days are coming! Of that I am quite certain, and so can you be. Thank you for listening. I wish you all the very best for this hopefully final exclusively on-screen semester, the summer semester of 2021.