

Rethinking the University



Discussion group (from left): Corinna Dahm-Brey, Matthias Echterhagen (both from the Press and Public Relations Office), Sabine Doering, Birger Kollmeier, Katharina Al-Shamery and Niko Paech.

The University of Oldenburg celebrates its 40th anniversary this year. What makes this university special? What are the responsibilities of academics in general? How should education look in the future? And how can universities encourage students' thirst for knowledge? An exchange of views between Acting University President and chemistry professor Katharina Al-Shamery, literature professor Sabine Doering, hearing researcher Birger Kollmeier and economic growth critic Niko Paech

Ms Al-Shamery, you came to Oldenburg as a physical chemistry lecturer in 1999. What was it like when you first started here?

Al-Shamery: I was immediately involved in discussions about projects that were exciting and, above all, interdisciplinary. Biologists were having discussions with archaeologists, historians, philosophers and also chemists like myself about things like patina on paintings and sculptures. That was completely new to me. And also the discussions about teaching methodology were entirely different here. At other universities teaching methodology was always sidelined and ridiculed to a certain extent. Here it was at the centre of things. I still value precisely this difference in the culture at Oldenburg University today – it makes it special. And it is also no doubt the reason why many colleagues prefer to stay on here even when they are offered prestigious posts elsewhere.

Mr Kollmeier, what was your experience?

Kollmeier: I can recall exactly what it was like when I started here. At 33 I was the youngest professor in the faculty when I came to Oldenburg in 1992. In Göttingen I had addressed all the students with „du“, while they used the formal „Sie“ with me. Then I came to Oldenburg and addressed everyone with „Sie“ and they all used „du“ with me. It was a bit of a culture shock. All in all those first years weren't that easy for me, as the youngest professor leading the largest team of 16 people – plus all the equipment and space we needed. But they certainly had a major influence on me.

Ms Doering, did you experience a culture shock when you first came to the Institute for German Studies in 2001?

Doering: Yes, you could say that, in a positive sense. I particularly recall the sense of renewal that prevailed at the institute and in the faculty at the time, which also led to feelings of uncertainty. I had just turned 40, there was a handful of colleagues under 50, while the rest were heading for retirement. Those were

exciting times in which the younger among us were handed responsibility very quickly. Things had been very different for me in Bavaria. Here in Oldenburg I suddenly had the chance to help mould the institute and its working conditions. I found myself among a strong and at first glance homogenous founder generation that wavered between nostalgia, steadfastness and a wonderful sense of self-assurance.

Mr Paech, you came to the university from the city administration ...

Paech: That's right, I was the Agenda 21 representative in Oldenburg for three years. Then I saw a call for applications, a project of the Federal Ministry of Education and Research that dealt with sustainability research for markets and corporations. Naturally I already knew the university, and it had a good reputation. I quickly realised that it wasn't just good in sustainability research but also had a very high standing due to its openness for problems relating to society as a whole. Later, after my habilitation, I

naturally had far more possibilities to actively organise research projects. But for me there's another important point: what I really like is that at this university you experience an interdisciplinarity that elsewhere you only hear about in pretty speeches. An interdisciplinarity that is constantly invoked by politicians involved in university and science policy, but seldom put into practice.

Mr Kollmeier, you are seen as one of the university's scientific standard-bearers. Among other things you are in charge of the Hearing4all Cluster of Excellence. If you had to put it in a few words, what is the driving force of your research?

Kollmeier: To advance basic knowledge in the natural sciences. In the cluster we are dedicated to researching the sense of hearing, an extremely complicated system that we want to understand better. And that can't happen without constantly learning new things in an absolutely interdisciplinary environment like that here in Oldenburg. I comple-



We all have in common that we strive to come closer to the truth": The foyer in the auditorium building.

tely agree with Mr Paech on that. And this is the core idea as I see it: studying something from different perspectives and thus gaining a better understanding of the underlying structure of the system considered.

"Excellent research in the humanities is sometimes carried out without any external funding at all."

Sabine Doering

Ms Doering, as a humanities scholar you probably have different priorities?

Doering: Well, we all have in common that we are committed to scientific principles. And that we strive to come closer to the truth. Nonetheless I do frequently encounter a certain sense of alienation regarding the things we literary scholars study – also because it's not so easy for me to say that society will benefit directly from what I do. But the study of literature is of great importance. I'm convinced that art in its various forms of expression is an anthropological constant and a profound human need. We must

study the products of the arts if we want to understand who we are and what major questions we need to address.

Can you give an example?

Doering: When in my work I deal intensively with the literature and thinking of the period around 1800 – one of the most important phases in modern literature and the history of ideas – I help people to understand how ways of thinking and decisions developed, whose impact we still feel today. And yet my main objective here is not the instrumentality of such knowledge as such but the historical depth of our present time, which needs to be subjected to well-founded scholarly reflection. To value this requires a different perspective. Academic value is often measured in terms of external funding and the number of colleagues researching a subject. And that's wrong. Excellent research in the humanities is sometimes carried out without any external funding at all. And what that research needs more than anything else is something which is scarcely available in my faculty because of the burgeoning obligations in teaching and mentoring, namely time.

Paech: That's true, we economists also lack the time to develop creative and problem-oriented theoretical content because we're constantly in a hurry. We have to continually demonstrate how many projects we have and how much they're worth. This is, so to speak, a physical and at times distorted evaluation procedure. A project is considered unimportant because it was only allocated 350,000 euros. Another project is deemed more important just because it brought in double that amount. But the primary question we have to ask is how this society benefits from carrying out a specific research project or developing a certain corpus that involves multiple members of staff and competences?

Have universities ultimately become blind to the problems of society?

Paech: They often remind me of the cocktail bar on the Titanic, where the bartender wonders how he can refine the cocktails while the ship is already keeling. To name just one example, society still hasn't come to terms with the financial crisis of 2008. The obvious conclusions have not been drawn. In view of the many instabilities in the monetary

Prof. Dr. Katharina Al-Shamery

Prof. Dr. Katharina Al-Shamery is Acting President of the University of Oldenburg. She is a professor of chemistry and Scientific Member of the Senate of the German Research Foundation (DFG). She is also a member of the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina. She has been awarded the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany for her achievements in science and research. From 2011 to 2014 she was a member of the independent committee „Ombudsman für die Wissenschaft“.



and financial system, we really are on the Titanic. Where are the alternative economic models? We need to reflect more on what changes are necessary to make a society more crisis-proof. And interdisciplinary cooperation can create the perfect conditions for developing such resilience.

Kollmeier: To stay with that image, I feel more like the professor in that cocktail bar. Ultimately we have two currencies: money and time. It is a question of efficiency, of how much time we can use for procuring funding, as we're compelled to do in order to be able to carry out research under certain conditions. Therefore I don't see reducing everything to money as so decisive. I don't get the impression that our university is primarily driven by money or external funding. And a person's status certainly can't be measured in terms of the allocation of external funding.

"Forming their personalities must play a major role."

Katharina Al-Shamery

Al-Shamery: I find it difficult even to see where universities are heading today. Society increasingly demands of us that we spend three years of research on a project and deliver the product immediately afterwards. This seems short sighted to me. Universities are not just places where research is carried out. They also educate young people who are later on expected to bear responsibility in their careers. Forming their personalities must therefore play a major role. In practice the students rush from one exam to the next. The question we need to ask is how we can develop our universities so that students are capable of shouldering responsibility later on, so that they learn combinatorial, stra-

tegic thinking and are able to develop their own visions? Including, and above all, visions for our society's future. So we must oppose this short-sighted view and review our ideas about what universities are. And the University of Oldenburg can make an important contribution here.

Mr Paech, you have a reputation as an unconventional thinker. The magazine „Die Zeit“ once described you as a „radical growth critic“. How important is it for you to be „unconventional“ and to adopt unconventional positions in academia?

Paech: It's clear that today anyone who argues against economic growth and even claims to do so using scientific arguments will be considered unconventional. But what interests me is the question of how one positions oneself as an unconventional thinker within a network of fellow academics and also within a faculty. And in this respect I stand by

my positive impression of this university, because not only am I tolerated here, but sometimes I even receive support.

In what way?

Paech: My colleagues often voice different views to mine. But they do it within the context of their work and also of their networks beyond the boundaries of their own departments, while also allowing for different views. For us all, the general principle applies that unconventional thinking must not divert attention from the criteria for good research and good teaching. For me it's very important to also be skilled at what I do.

Doering: I agree. Being unconventional is not a value in itself. As Mr Paech said, competence is primary. And I see it as a great strength of this university that we encourage independence in the face of the disciplinary traditions. At the same time we must take care to ensure that certain unconventional topics aren't carved in stone. Not all that was uncon-



In the dead of the night in October 1974 students secretly put the name „Carl von Ossietzky“ in large letters onto the University tower. The name wasn't officially approved until 1991.



Prof. Dr. Sabine Doering

Sabine Doering is professor for modern German literature at the University of Oldenburg. She is currently conducting research as a residential fellow at the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Study (NDIAS) of the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, USA). Doering serves as president of the Tübingen-based international Hölderlin Society and also as a member of Academic Advisory Council of the Federal Institute for Culture and History of the Germans in Eastern Europe (BKGE).

ventional and innovative yesterday is necessarily relevant or good today. And at the moment I see a lot of new energy, also among my colleagues, focussed on the question of what the important topics are today, and – far more importantly – what they will be tomorrow.

Al-Shamery: But that question has always been a driving force at Oldenburg University. Take the research on renewable energies. It came about as a result of the anti-nuclear energy movement, and if you dealt with the „renewables“, as Joachim Luther [a professor of nuclear physics at the University of Oldenburg in the 1970s, who later became interested in renewable energy] did back then, you were immediately put in a pigeon hole. When we reflect on how this line of research on renewable energies has gained influence worldwide, we have to say that it has more than paid off. I also find it important to not just focus on the major projects and cut back on everything else. It's crucial to also promote projects that are deemed exotic elsewhere. Henrik Mouritsen's research on navigation in migratory birds is a good example. We are aiming for a certain diversity, and that means making room for new things, and that room can only be created if you allow unusual projects too.

The Oldenburg hearing research project also started in an unusual way – with a noise protection project. Mr Kollmeier, what role does unconventional thinking play in your research?
Kollmeier: A big role certainly – taking me as an example you might see that I don't really fit into any category either. I'm neither a pure physicist nor a pure medical doctor, and right from the start of my education I saw the better methodology in physics and the more interesting questions in medicine. In the end I tried to bring the two things together

– and that is now partially reflected in the medical education at our university. We all benefit from the fact that this university is not a venerable institution with old structures, but a very dynamic one where you can feel comfortable in non-classical areas – and unconventional thinking is an advantage there.

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Birger Kollmeier

Doering: For me, unconventional thinking means not running after the latest trends. In the humanities in particular, that is often the case. One „turn“ after another is announced. And there are universities that are very quick at adapting to the latest turn, only to lag behind later on. That's why I think it's important that we have places here where you experience trust. And also for example follow goals that are not so fashionable, but have a fundamental long-term value. Our responsibility as academics in the positive sense, whether the topics are trendy or traditional, is to be role models and show perseverance and to say: „These are the topics we are investigating.“

Paech: The question is how we can encourage young people to leave the beaten track every now and then, no matter what their discipline. This is only possible at universities where conflicts of opinion are argued out in a productive way. It doesn't do any harm if there's a little friction here and there. One aspect we economists are arguing about is

whether we want to stick to the expansive prosperity model that emerged after the Second World War, come hell or high water? Or should we at the universities in fact start asking whether a different kind of economy, one that breaks with traditional concepts, needs to be developed? Much can be learned from such controversies. And I believe this is what really captivates the students: a frank and fair exchange of views.

Doering: A problem we have in German is that the number of students we teach is constantly growing. A few years ago we had around 150 students in the first semester lecture in German literature. Now it's 300. They need first-rate teaching. We have the funds from the Higher Education Pact, but much of the teaching is done by the PhD students and postdocs, leaving them less time for research. And I would like to see us become more successful at creating a research- and performance-oriented climate right from the initial phase of studies. The consequence of a misunderstood bachelor system is the attitude that the goal is to collect as many credits as possible with the least possible effort. Unfortunately I sometimes see particularly dedicated students having a hard time and preferring to keep their mouths shut because they don't want to be seen as overambitious. We must show right from the start that university and education are not just about earning a bachelor's degree, but about being inspired by important problems and substantive questions, and mastering them together.

Education that inspires: Ms Al-Shamery, must the university do more to achieve this?

Al-Shamery: We must use this moment in time to reflect on university education. We are all a little older and know what university was like when



On the way to the next exam? Or towards a vision for our society's future?

we studied. There was a huge culture of debate; some things we found terrible and others not. But the atmosphere was always very lively, and we consciously addressed issues in society. Today I sense a dwindling enthusiasm for the various subjects. Eyes should shine with enthusiasm once more – and people should come to the University of Oldenburg because they want to gain knowledge. For this to happen, university education must again be a matter for debate, and together with other universities we can spearhead that debate. At the same time I want us to continue making headway

in the promotion of young researchers – with 18 programmes we already play a leading role in Lower Saxony alongside Göttingen.

Mr Paech, what do you want for the university's future?

Paech: As an economist I want different sustainable economic models to be dealt with without preconceptions and on equal terms. As you said, Ms Al-Shamery, we need to get young people interested in the actual course content, not just in their careers after their studies. Unfortunately at the moment universities

aren't acting as pioneers for sustainable development because they are too uncritical about our modern society, which is based on excessive, completely illusory lifestyles.

What does that mean in concrete terms for the university?

Paech: Many young people go to university to have an excuse for not getting their hands dirty with what we used to call production, labour or a skilled manual job. People who go to university today expect to enjoy a good social status and a comfortable, globally uncon-

Prof. Dr. Birger Kollmeier

Physicist and physician Birger Kollmeier is coordinator of the „Hearing4all“ Cluster of Excellence and also head of the „Medical Physics“ department, the Hörzentrum Oldenburg GmbH and the Fraunhofer Project Group for Hearing, Speech and Audio Technology. Kollmeier has received a number of prestigious awards, including the International Award of the American Academy of Audiology and the German President's Award for Technology and Innovation.





Prof. Dr. Niko Paech

Niko Paech is professor for „Production and Environment“ at the University of Oldenburg and committee member of the Association for Ecological Economy (VÖÖ). Paech is well known as a radical growth critic and has received several awards for his ideas on a „post-growth economy“, including the ZEIT WISSEN Sustainability Prize. Paech is also an active member of institutions such as the Oldenburg energy cooperative OLEGENO, the Kompetenzzentrum Bauen und Energie (KoBE) and the Polygenos cooperative.

strained life later on – anything else is out of the question for them. Meanwhile the material downside of our existence is outsourced to India and China. The belief in progress, in being able to replace matter with knowledge and symbols, is one of the great problems of our education system. And I expect universities, and economists in particular, to finally develop sustainable alternatives for the future.

Mr Kollmeier, what do you see as the university's most important tasks – what do you want for it?

Kollmeier: For me the top priority is the battle for the best brains. It needn't necessarily be people from all over the world; people from Germany are also a good choice. The quality of people doesn't

improve the further away they are. We have plenty that we can build on right here in this region. I would like to see us getting better and better and put this into practice to attract the best brains.

“Unfortunately at the moment universities aren't acting as pioneers for sustainable development.”

Niko Paech

And you, Ms Doering?

Doering: We have the good fortune that the generation before us fought to have this university named after a wonderful person. Carl von Ossietzky was an unconventional thinker who used his

personality to campaign for those things he considered most important: freedom, justice and peace. And I would like to see the entire university discussing once more how deeply indebted we are to this person as our namesake. I would also like that discussion to involve the students. Because those who campaigned for the university to be given that name weren't unworldly crackpots. They were people who saw in the person of Carl von Ossietzky an agenda which each new generation must reflect upon anew.

Ms Al-Shamery, Ms Doering, Mr Kollmeier and Mr Paech, we thank you for this discussion.

Interview: Corinna Dahm-Brey, Matthias Echterhagen



„The trajectory of research on renewable energies“. The plans for the self-sufficient Energy Lab – with its photovoltaic systems pictured here – were developed in the 1970s.