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

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 it 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.

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 evaluative procedure. A project is considered important 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 barkeeper wonders how he can refine the cocktails while the ship is already keeling. To name just one example, so to speak, a phy- sical and structural flaw can create 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 unconven- tional 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 differ- ent 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 unconven-
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). Doering serves as president of the Tübingen-based international Hölderlin Society and also as a member of the Academic Advisory Council of the Federal Institute for Culture and History of the Germans in Eastern Europe (BKG).
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

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 OLEGino, the Kompetenzzentrum Bauen und Energie (KoBE) and the Polygenos cooperative.