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University leaders from Japan and Germany:

Cooperation and exchange between universities and society is key, but rules must be clear

Cooperation and exchange between universities and society is key for the development of future-oriented universities, but it must remain true to the universities' fundamental mission, and the rules must be clear. This was the conclusion arrived at by the delegates to the fourth joint symposium of the Japan Committee of Universities for International Exchange (JACUIE), the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the Japanese-German Center Berlin (JDZB) held in Tokyo on 26/27 April 2018.

A total of 160 experts from Japan and Germany – including 65 university leaders – discussed how universities in both countries could cooperate with society, business and industry in an effective and mutually beneficial way without giving up their original mission in research and teaching. What are the success factors for long-term collaboration? Which checks and balances are needed? And how can interests be balanced in such a way that cooperation and exchange take place on an equal footing?

At their previous meeting in Berlin in 2016, the organisers adopted three guiding principles that apply to the successful interaction of universities and society:

- Laying the foundations with sound education and training: Comprehensive, academically sound education and training form the basis for innovation and societal progress. This not only includes the communication of specialist knowledge and professional competencies, but also the development of mature individuals whose actions are guided by ethical principles.
- Promoting transdisciplinary and trans-sectoral cooperation: The diversity of specialist disciplines must be maintained at the current level. It is not just the engineering sciences and natural sciences but also the social sciences and the humanities that play a key role for and in society. At the same time, transdisciplinary and trans-sectoral cooperation must be promoted at all levels and on a permanent basis.
- Establishing funding schemes and criteria for performance measurement that are adequate to the nature and the needs of education and research: Both funding programmes and the criteria used to assess university performance must be appropriate to the character and the demands of research and higher education. It is critical to formulate definitions of successful performance which are adequate to the nature and the needs of academic education and research, and which are acceptable to all stakeholders. For that reason, not only quantitative aspects but also qualitative aspects need to be adequately incorporated into the evaluation of institutional performance. Finally, it is vital that suitable funding programmes be established which are open and dynamic and encourage inter-disciplinary as well as inter-sectoral research partnerships.

Based on these guiding principles, university representatives exchanged examples of good practice from both countries and discussed what kind of actions need to be taken to put the principles into effect, taking into account the current situation of universities in Japan and Germany.

Prof. Dr. Kyosuke Nagata, chairman of JACUIE, noted: “Faced with challenges brought by innovation and globalization, universities are expected to nurture talents who can contribute to create a sustainable and inclusive society in the future, equipped with challenging spirit and wide perspective as well as advanced knowledge and skill. Furthermore, in the advent of knowledge-based society, universities are expected to contribute to the economic and social development of the nation and regions by generating new knowledge and innovation as well as solving present and future issues. In order to respond to those expectations, universities should, while maintaining their core role of promoting wide-ranging basic academic research, collaborate with various sectors in the society and enhance the diversity of students, faculty, curriculum, and research. We should also establish an effective and flexible governance system to cope with such new challenges. In order to do so, it is essential that universities are assured stable basic funding by the Government. Furthermore, for the development of innovation it is important to cultivate PhD candidates in cooperation with industry as well as research institutes.”

His German colleague, HRK President Prof Dr Horst Hippler, said: “Universities define and develop their key roles in research and teaching in constant dialogue with society. They render services that benefit the society’s scientific, economic, and cultural development. All parties involved – researchers and students, the university as a whole, society and industry alike – benefit from cooperation and transfer when it is done right and when the rules applied are clear and transparent. Particularly, bi-directional mobility of PhD candidates and early-stage researchers between universities and administration, business and industry creates a win-win situation and is key for innovation in industry and the overall positive development of societies. We are glad to see that the German Government clearly acknowledges the importance of this investment into our common future, and is providing universities with the resources necessary to sustain this mobility.”

Dr. Friederike Bosse, Secretary-General of the Japanese-German Center Berlin, added: “Universities are a very important source of inspiration and a driving force for the well-being and welfare of the community and region in which they are located. Their networking and exchanges with business and civil society, as well as the support they provide in creating new business and new initiatives, contribute to the prosperity of the region. Through their role in education and research and the support they provide for the acquisition of management skills and an entrepreneurial mindset, they also serve the region and the society as a whole. Having held three previous symposia, I am delighted that we have been able to arrange this symposium and thus deepen our exchange over the last 12 years and enhance German-Japanese dialogue on the roles of universities and higher education.”

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