



Leopoldina
Nationale Akademie
der Wissenschaften

Der Präsident

Halle (Saale), September 2020

Dear members, friends and employees of the Leopoldina,

These days, concerns about our health are more closely linked to dramatic global events than they have been for a very long time. The fight against the coronavirus pandemic will continue to shape our private, public and professional lives in the coming months. In this context, scientists bear a particular responsibility: to develop vaccines, medicines and testing methods under the pressure of time. Meanwhile, politicians and the public expect scientists to provide them with rapid, reliable advice on the pressing issue of what individual and societal measures should be taken to curb the pandemic and mitigate its impact.

This situation creates unprecedented challenges, even for a well-established academy like the Leopoldina. Of course, it means that we must diligently comply with the crucial measures introduced to combat the pandemic. It was therefore with a heavy heart that we made the decision several weeks ago not to hold the Annual Assembly 2020 on the topic of “Biodiversity and the Future of Variety” as planned. It will instead be postponed to 24/25 September 2021 and I am very grateful for the understanding that you have shown for this decision. My heartfelt thanks go out to the members and employees of the Leopoldina who had already put so much work into organising this year’s Annual Assembly. Your efforts will not have been in vain.

A letter is no substitute for the conversations that I was looking forward to having with you during the Annual Assembly in my new role as President of the Academy. However, I would at least like to seize this opportunity to report on one important development from recent months. Despite the lockdown, the cancellation of so many events and the restrictions on our ability to work, this has been a busy time for the Leopoldina. Our prompt reaction to this unprecedented situation was highly due to the support I received from my predecessor in office, the 26th President of the Leopoldina Jörg Hacker, who retains close ties to our academy. For this, Jörg, you have my warmest thanks.

When I took office on 20 February, I said that one central goal of my presidency would be for the Leopoldina to provide its science-based policy recommendations to politicians and the public in a shorter time frame where necessary, without compromising on its independence, interdisciplinarity or high quality. The reality of the coronavirus pandemic has overtaken our plans. As the virus spread, scientists were increasingly expected to provide a constant stream of up-to-date information as well as realistic recommendations for action, all while listening out for questions and criticism.

The expectations placed on the Leopoldina were especially great, given its role as Germany's National Academy of Sciences and its members' traditional expertise, in medicine and life sciences in particular. Since the pandemic took hold in Germany, we have tapped into this potential and linked it to numerous other scientific and academic fields, from statistical modelling to education research to law and the consideration of competing legal rights. With flexible working groups collaborating closely online, we have managed to publish five ad hoc statements to date, helping to establish the protection of health as the foremost goal of all measures introduced to combat the pandemic. At the same time, the recommendations provided in our statements also recognise the need to preserve our way of life as a society.

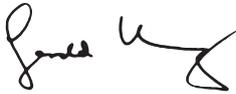
I am deeply grateful to the Presidium of the Academy for the steadfast support they have shown as we work our way through the pandemic. The significant progress that the Leopoldina has made despite these unusual circumstances is above all thanks to the profound sense of responsibility and the impressive generosity demonstrated by so many of our members and by other scientists who have shared their time, knowledge and professional judgement with us. All of the Leopoldina's departments did a great job in coordinating with one another, sometimes outside of their usual office hours, often working from home – a testament to their team spirit. My deepest thanks go out to all of you.

Our work on the ad hoc statements has made it increasingly clear to me what challenges the Leopoldina will face as we strive to provide faster, more anticipatory science-based advice. We want to ensure that our working groups' discussions focus more closely on possible recommendations from an early stage – but this alone will not suffice. For the statements to have the greatest possible impact, the topics chosen must closely align with the expected focus of the public debate at the time the statements will be published. The timing of their publication has to be coordinated with ongoing political decision-making processes and the various target audiences must be individually addressed with greater nuance. We should also be aware that, when our ad hoc statements attract particular attention both in Germany and abroad, politicians and the public will naturally take a more critical look at our methods. This means that we must not shy away from giving transparent answers to detailed questions about our working groups – for example, about the scientific disciplines they integrate, or about the procedures we use to ensure high-quality results while meeting tight deadlines.

Nor should we avoid engaging with and learning from justified criticism. I am confident that we can do this, and I would like to continue along the path we have taken in recent months in order to increase the relevance of our academy's science-based policy advice for the democratic discourse in the long term.

First and foremost, I wish you good health and a continued sense of well-being in the coming weeks and months. I hope that we will all continue to do our part – within the Leopoldina and beyond – to overcome the coronavirus pandemic as soon as possible and that we can subsequently learn from our successes and mistakes. I look forward to being able to discuss this with you at our Annual Assembly 2021 – face to face, here in Halle!

Warm regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gerald Haug', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Gerald Haug