

»Research is our lever«

Professor Birgitta Wolff, president of Goethe University, on the growing significance of sustainability research during her term of office

Anke Sauter: Professor Wolff, there are universities that have supposedly already been climate neutral for years. How climate friendly is Goethe University?

Birgitta Wolff: We need to differentiate here: How do we behave as an organisation and what can we, as a research and education institution, offer society? As an organisation, it's naturally important precisely in view of our size that our actions are as environmentally friendly as possible. But as a university with outstanding researchers, we've so much more to offer: We produce sound research results that can advance humanity as a whole.

When you look back at your six-year term of office: What has changed in this field of research?

During my term of office, we launched a profile-building process that embraced the whole of Goethe University and involved a large number of researchers. The result of this multi-stage process is a profile that aims to mirror the dynamics of the research landscape. We now have six profile areas, of which »Climate, Earth, Environment« is a separate one, meaning that we have repositioned sustainability research. Sustainability is now firmly established at the »top« level of our research goals and will in future make a significant contribution to Goethe University's profile. This topic did not appear in our previous research profile with the »tiles«.

Presumably because in the past there was no Collaborative Research Centre in this field?

Perhaps. In fact, there is still no Collaborative Research Centre, but there are

other formats instead. And we've created a solid foundation for further developing this profile area. However, there will, of course, still be enough to do here for my successor Enrico Schleiff.

What are the consequences for sustainability research now that it has its own profile area?

The research profile allows us to enhance the visibility of this area and support it in a more targeted manner. Overall, it's already very lively: There are not only projects with the German Research Foundation but also with and for the Federal State of Hessen as well as with the City of Frankfurt. That's the great thing about this very broad field of work – the fact that it has very many facets. You can explore very abstract aspects of ecological, economic and social sustainability, but also prompt very concrete changes. Georg Zizka, for example, has a project where he is compiling a biotope mapping of the City of Frankfurt, Wolfgang Brüggemann is running a project with the Federal State of Hessen on the woodlands of the future. The researchers working in the area of »Climate, Earth, Environment« feel responsible for current problems. As far as the topic of environment is concerned, this is more or less automatic.

Scientific findings are one thing, but above all it's also a matter of communicating existing knowledge to a broader public.

This is where the profile-building process has also triggered a lot of new activities and brought various research disciplines together. Professor Böhning-Gaese and the researchers at Senckenberg, for example, want to take the »Planetary Thinking« format to the next level and the

Forschungskolleg Humanwissenschaften in Bad Homburg is involved as a platform. There are some great cross-disciplinary initiatives; we will have to see in which direction they develop and how we can give them a boost.

Another central topic is science communication: How can scientific results be communicated to people in a more understandable way?

I believe it's less a case of a fundamental lack of knowledge or information when it comes to sustainability issues. The difficulty lies rather in putting knowledge into practice. This phenomenon can also be observed in change management in organisations; I dealt with this many years ago in my postdoctoral dissertation. Knowing what needs to be done is not the be-all and end-all. Getting people to put this knowledge into practice is an art. But I'm optimistic that this will work eventually. After all, we've seen with digitalisation, for example, that it works: If we had asked around a year ago who uses videoconferencing or – at the university, for example, – who likes working with the OLAT platform, we would have reaped totally different answers than now. The way we communicate specialist topics is, of course, also important: We need to convey the urgency in a credible manner, make behavioural changes attractive and not intimidate people with a menacing scenario of future apocalypses. And we have to create clear guidelines for appropriate behaviour.

The focus is also on the economy as a major energy consumer, the automotive industry so sluggish at adapting. To what extent, in your view, is the onus here on the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration?

Experts at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration are working on the topic too. There is the Green Finance branch at SAFE, the new Leibniz Institute, too. Both environmental as well as business economists at the faculty are thinking about it; economic decisions need to be reviewed under consideration of cost aspects and reputation, and corporate management needs to adjust accordingly. There is still a lot of research work to be done on this in all areas of

»We've repositioned sustainability research«: For Birgitta Wolff, president of Goethe University, the climate crisis is very high up on the research agenda.



a high level of computing performance in a more environmentally friendly way.

The Fridays-for-Future movement has given environmental topics another powerful boost. Has this also had an impact at administrative level?

We belong to the »Carbon-neutral Hessen Network« and are working together with the regional government. As far as climate policy goals are concerned, the university and the state are on the same wavelength. I believe, however, that at the end of the day we as Goethe University can make a much, much greater contribution through environment-related research and environmental education. I would always consider environment-related research to be our greater contribution than our own efforts at prevention.

On the initiative of students and other groups, the Goethe Green Office has been set up. What's the current status?

The decision has been made; it has started to operate in a preliminary way. Here too, we need to proceed in a scientifically sound manner. Many of the Green Office people have already familiarised themselves in depth with the different topics and are putting forward a variety of ideas. We need to see, together with the experts from our Energy Management team, whether all these good ideas can actually be put into practice. It seems that some of them cannot be implemented one to one. An example is bicycle leasing: The lovely idea that we, as employers, subsidise the use of bicycles is difficult insofar as we have state budget regulations and receive our funds explicitly for research and teaching. I think there is a lot of work ahead for a future Green Office.

Thank you very much for the interview.

the social sciences, more so than in the natural sciences. We also need to understand how different variants of environmental pricing work. Do we place our bets on emissions trading or on completely different mechanisms? It's often very difficult to gauge what can work and what cannot, and the debate here often gets stifled by the hum of political controversies. We as a university can support this discourse more.

How do you, as an economist, see the role of the economy in the transformation process?

As an economist, I think that as a society we should reduce environmental impacts where it's easiest, simplest and least costly for society as a whole. How these costs are then borne by society and not offloaded onto individual companies, which, in the immediate sense, are the polluters, needs to be discussed. The »Joe Bloggs« solution of simply raising environmental standards for German companies is not a good one; everyone knows that. Because as long as environmental standards only apply in Germany, there will be no worldwide improvement whatsoever. Instead, the dirty industries can simply continue to shift to locations

where regulation is less rigorous. International cooperation will be crucial.

Can we talk a bit more about Goethe University as an organisation? If it wants to behave in an environmentally friendly manner, it's dependent on each individual.

Yes, the Federal State of Hessen compensates for official travel, for example. That is, of course, a completely different approach to avoiding official travel altogether. I believe we can make a contribution here. We're seeing right now in times of the pandemic just how superfluous a lot of official travel is. On the other hand, we're also learning how detrimental to the environment an excessive use of computers and videoconferencing is. And this brings us back to our brand essence – research: Consider the topic of high-performance computing, a field where Volker Lindenstruth is making tremendous progress. His research results are not only exciting for science but also for us as an organisation. We're using his technology and thus have lower energy consumption in high-performance computing than if we were to use conventional computers. At the same time, we can also offer this knowledge to others and help to supply