

Panel Discussion: Are universities allowed and capable to plan their research?

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Remarks on: Planning Research for the Future

The best way to anticipate the future is to design and to shape it – this motto should be mandatory both for politics and research. Considering the situation in academic research, the principle seems not to be as commonly accepted as it should be. When it comes to research, most institutions tend to neglect the potential which can be realized by planning future activities. To avoid a typical misconception: this is not a question of how to identify future methods and innovations. Nor should it be debatable to renew the ideology of five-year-plans for research. However, it is possible to identify urgent topics, the potential for cooperation, and the funding perspectives. These are three fields of major interest available for foresight activities, aiming to cope with future challenges.

1st: Foresight activities should depart from the question of social requirements for present research. Unless we manage our recent challenges, we are not able to discuss future needs. The most unique way toward anticipating research tasks of tomorrow is to understand what we have to do now. No one is able to overview the future without grasping his or her own present.

2nd: Drafting future fields of research demands a deep knowledge of cooperation potentials. This must imply a scrutiny of innovative types of cooperation, an identification of new ways of bridging different disciplines, and the establishment of hubs and knots for joint methods. To find a mutual basis bringing together the respective fields is a distinct goal for foresight analysis – and a cornerstone of its success.

3rd: These premises reveal that planning research for the future must be an institutional activity, stimulated by the universities' (or extramural institutions') executive board, carried out by experts who are well informed on current developments. Both tools for a research strategy and measures to match people of different disciplines are elements of an overarching perspective which should be sketched by the executive unit. This does not mean that planning research is a top down agenda – all initiatives for future activities have to be launched by the researchers themselves. But the first step has to be taken by the executive unit in order to establish stimulating environments for future activities.

4th: Foresight activities should focus on identifying funding perspectives. They have to improve the standards for future research by tracing resources for material support. Indicators for success are, for this reason, how strategic development enables the university to allocate means for new projects. Finally, this is a pragmatic but important reason for a university to develop an agenda for the future – the university must act (and not react), aiming for better material perspectives for the future.