

THE GERMAN COUNCIL OF SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES (WISSENSCHAFTSRAT) PROVIDES ADVICE TO THE GERMAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AND THE STATE (LÄNDER) GOVERNMENTS ON THE STRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH.

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# An impulse from the COVID-19 crisis: strengthening the resilience of the research and higher education system

The COVID-19 crisis is an historic watershed moment whose full extent cannot yet be fathomed. While it has accelerated transformation processes such as digital change, it has also slowed down or set back others, including efforts to internationalise science and research. “In a situation where society and science are still in the tight grip of acute crisis management, the German Council of Sciences and Humanities (Wissenschaftsrat, WR) is firmly looking to the future,” says Dorothea Wagner, chairwoman of the science policy advisory committee to the German federal and state governments.

For this reason, the WR decided to publish its position paper on “Impulses from the COVID-19 crisis for the advancement of the research and higher education system in Germany”. According to Ms. Wagner, the goal of the paper is to identify the challenges and weaknesses of the research and higher education system which have become apparent during the crisis, and to advance both necessary transformations and a debate about a fundamental re-orientation of science policy actions.

The current acute stress situation has highlighted ten challenges for the German research and higher education system. These range from crisis response capabilities in policy consulting and a lack of sovereignty and security with regard to the digital space to strategic challenges in internationalisation. For the most part, these challenges and the resulting needs for action have, not least, become apparent in the area of health research. The great success of the vaccine development must not belie the fact that the German research and higher education system is also showing significant weaknesses. Germany is, for instance, lagging behind considerably in the networking and managing of data – primarily but not exclusively in health research. Many of these challenges possess an international dimension. The crisis has proved to be a veritable stress test in the areas of mobility, collaboration and data exchange across borders.

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The positive and negative experiences from this must be assessed, and the results of these assessments must lead to the development of new strategic priorities.

Furthermore, the pandemic requires that close scrutiny be given to the values towards which science policy actions should be oriented for the long term. While the term “resilience” entered the discourse of economic policy, security policy and development policy in the wake of past or present crises, a specific notion of resilience in the context of the research and higher education system has not yet been defined. The WR is therefore encouraging that a debate be initiated within the research and higher education system regarding the significance and understanding of resilience. The system’s development should not be solely oriented towards the promotion of efficiency and competitiveness. Rather, it should be oriented towards resilience as the ability to anticipate and manage crises – as well as to emerge from crises both changed and stronger.

“When the crisis is over, we should not simply return to business as usual. The next crisis may prove to be of a completely different nature and as a society, we should be prepared for that,” explains Ms. Wagner. “Science is a means of helping us shape the future and handling crises. If we want to fulfil these tasks competently, the research and higher education system must be both responsive and resilient. Despite all the pain it has caused, let us see this crisis as an opportunity as well.”

## Notes

The English background information is available here:

[https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/hginfo\\_0221\\_Covid19\\_engl.pdf](https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/hginfo_0221_Covid19_engl.pdf).

The position paper on “Impulses from the COVID-19 crisis for the advancement of the research and higher education system in Germany” is available for download here

(German version only: “Impulse aus der COVID-19-Krise für die Weiterentwicklung des Wissenschaftssystems in Deutschland | Positionspapier (Drs. 8834-21), Januar 2021”):

<https://www.wissenschaftsrat.de/download/2021/8834-21.pdf>.

Both papers can also be requested from the Head Office of the Science Council by e-mail ([post@wissenschaftsrat.de](mailto:post@wissenschaftsrat.de)).