

“Providing support, advice and analysis – that is the brand essence of the DAAD”



Jonas Ratermann

New DAAD president Prof. Dr. Joybrato Mukherjee sees the role of the DAAD as setting important impulses for internationalisation

Prof. Dr. Joybrato Mukherjee took office as president of the DAAD in January 2020. In addition to promoting academic exchange, he sees the core tasks of the DAAD as providing advice to the higher education sector and serving as a think tank for internationalisation. In the following interview, he explains why studying abroad in virtual space could be an important topic in the future and why universities will have to assume more responsibility in countering anti-scientific worldviews.

Professor Mukherjee, you begin your first term as president of the DAAD in 2020. Over the years in your previous position as vice president of the DAAD, you became acquainted with the work of the world’s largest organisation for academic exchange. How would you define the “DAAD brand” today?[]

On one hand, our task is to support scholarship holders and provide project financing to researchers – which we’ve been doing for the past 95 years. But today, thanks to the profound knowledge and expertise we have gained, we are also an importance source of advice for our member universities and policymakers. And since we have to assess the implications of various trends in internationalisation, higher education systems and the research sector earlier than others, we’re also a think tank. We wish to make recommendations on how to further develop internationalisation measures. Providing support, advice and analysis – always based on international cooperation – that is the brand essence of the DAAD at present.

What areas are you going to focus on to prepare the DAAD for its future tasks?[]

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we want to start at all three levels: support, advice and analysis. Of course, at the “support level”, we’ll continue to consult with our funding providers in the federal ministries as to what new programmes and instruments make sense. The funding lines undergo continual development in a dynamic process. In addition to individual scholarships, we will focus on project-related funding and transnational education projects in the future – as we’ve done intensively in past years, such as the Centres of Excellence for Research and Teaching, and the Centres of Excellence for Development Cooperation. These major flagship projects in the area of international cooperation are sure to play an even more significant role in the coming years.

With regard to the term “advice”, the DAAD recently established the Competence Centre for International Scientific Collaborations ...

Our intention was to offer better assistance to our member universities by allowing them to benefit from our expertise and international network. We can provide answers to questions regarding what countries and partners we should collaborate with. I’m very pleased we were able to achieve a whole new level of advising through this competence centre in time for my inauguration. It provides us with a suitable platform to expand our consultation services in many different directions. This is exactly the kind of assistance the universities wish to receive from the DAAD and which they need from us – I say this quite consciously as the president of one of the member universities.



Prof. Dr. Joybrato Mukherjee is certain that the new competence centre will enable the DAAD to offer consultation services at a new level

A sustainable internationalisation strategy is one of many tools used by universities today. Where do you see room for improvement?

All universities today recognise the importance of international cooperation in relation to their strategic development, performance and competitive edge. In the meantime, all universities have or are currently developing internationalisation strategies. Many of them participate in the Audit “Internationalisation of Universities” certification programme offered by the German Rectors’ Conference (HRK). At the moment, the situation is extremely dynamic in a positive sense. With the competence centre, we now have the possibility to assist universities in the longer term, offering advice on how to develop and implement their internationalisation strategies – with respect to concrete partner countries, partner institutions and ideas for international education projects. Many universities are already optimally prepared and have excellent internationalisation strategies in place. However, the smaller or more specialised universities often lack the necessary resources to fully follow through with these plans on their own. This is where we can provide advice suited to their respective profile, and the competence centre can provide a valuable contribution to this end.

And now to the third area of activity you mentioned – the DAAD functioning as a think tank. What aspects play an important role in this area?

There is a broad range of topics we have to intensively address – more often than not, “advice and analysis – that is the brand essence of the DAAD” - DAAD - Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst

unfortunately. For example, how will Brexit, when it finally arrives, concretely affect the academic cooperation between continental Europe and our British partners? How do we deal with EU member countries which – for whatever reasons – pose increasingly difficult challenges? How do we as the DAAD react when countries exert pressure on partner institutions in their aim to constrain academic freedom? What is our position in the climate policy debates of our time, and the negative aspects of physical mobility that we need to address? In this context, how could we make better use of digital or virtual formats? Questions like these are certain to occupy us more frequently in the future. Our task as a think tank is to anticipate developments and make our knowledge available to universities and policymakers.

So internationalisation and digitalisation are at the top of your agenda in the coming years? □

We'll definitely have to wait and see what developments require a response. When Professor Wintermantel became president of the DAAD in 2012 and I, vice president, we never imagined at our opening press conference that we'd be facing Brexit a few years later and that our international partnership even with the United States would become increasingly challenging. That's why I'm rather cautious about putting things on the drawing board. But naturally, there are some topics we'll have to address more intensively and strategically in the next four years. This includes digitalisation. At the DAAD we'll be exploring how digital formats and virtual environments could be used in international collaboration. We have to develop future scenarios. Is it so far-fetched to imagine that one day we'll have such perfect virtual environments that students could spend a semester abroad in virtual space? Today it sounds off the wall. But it is our task as a think tank to imagine what the future holds in ten to twenty years. The digital possibilities allow us to prepare international students for their intercultural experience in Germany much better today than ever before.

What other operative topics do you see ahead of you? □

I see a rather political issue at the very top of our agenda, namely the question of how we reconcile our basic values with our actions – and that in a world in which everything is becoming increasingly intertwined. In the climate debate, we realise that on this planet we belong to one community and share the same fate. Yet we're seeing tendencies to withdraw in isolation – even though we're existentially connected to one another. That's why solutions can only be mutually developed on an international scale. That is our fundamental business as the DAAD. But if isolationist and nationalistic tendencies continue to grow, and if these are joined by antagonism toward science and internationalisation, then we have a problem. This is something that we as the DAAD have to respond to. How can we defend our values, the values of the free Western world, without dogmatically ruling out cooperation with many parties? That is a major challenge.

There have been isolationist tendencies in Germany, as well. Do you believe that universities have a special responsibility to counteract these? □

Yes, we as universities and as society must always state the facts loud and clear – presently about 60 percent of all secondary school leavers enrol at university. We are no longer a club of elite – we find ourselves in the middle of society. Universities play an essential role in society, and in our cities and regions, we represent important anchors of stability. Right-wing populism and right-wing radicalism are gaining ground all around us. Especially in times such as these, universities have a particularly important role to play.

In a recent interview, you stated “We can't defend academic freedom in the sleeping car.” Have German universities been sitting in the wrong compartment? □

No. I just think that in these turbulent, challenging times, we universities have to be clearly aware of where our real priorities lie. When it comes down to it, it doesn't matter if we're ranked at number two or number 18, but rather that we defend our free and democratic order. The preservation of our democratic system takes precedence over all else. Today we are facing existential questions. Therefore, we as universities have to more strongly meet our responsibility to society.

How do you define the role of the DAAD in Europe? □

In addition to digitalisation and value-based action and negotiation of international cooperation, Europe will be the third major focus in the coming years. I am absolutely convinced that the universities can – and should – play a key role in this area. The joint European Higher Education Area is an essential stabiliser in the European community. We build identity. The unlimited European-wide mobility that makes intercultural experience possible has contributed to making young Germans, Belgians and French also feel like Europeans – and not only because it's to their advantage, but because it's become part of their identity. The same goes for the research field – we can only remain competitive as a research location on a global scale if we succeed in bringing together the talented minds throughout all the countries of Europe. That's why Brexit is a strike against the goal of bundling the intellectual capacities of Europe.

How would you define the task of the DAAD in the context of other funding organisations? □

The DAAD is represented in over 100 countries. We are an independent organisation with regional offices and information centres and more than 400 Lektors who teach at universities worldwide. We maintain what could be considered “embassies” and “consulates” for the German academic community abroad. The wonderful thing about the German academic system is that – if it's done the right way – we can profit from the complementary skills and competence of others. What we offer is a willingness to contribute our foreign academic-political expertise. In other words, we travel in a fleet together with the universities and other organisations – and we want to be an influential trendsetter in matters of internationalisation.

Will you continue to serve as president of the University of Giessen? □

My point of reference for this dual function is Professor Theodor Berchem who was president of the DAAD from 1988 to 2007, during which time he also held the top post at the University of Würzburg for 16 years. No one can claim that this period was an unsuccessful time for either the DAAD or the university – rather the opposite. I've been working intensively for the DAAD over the past years, and I'm supported by competent teams in both Bonn and Giessen. Therefore, I can only assume that this dual role will continue functioning just as well going forward. Although it means that everything will have to be even more tightly scheduled and closely coordinated, I very much look forward to the new task.

Interview: Janet Schayan