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Cultivating Young Academies

THIS OCTOBER, GERMANY CELEBRATED THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF ITS REUNIFICATION. OVER THE past two decades, the country has worked hard to reestablish its leadership in the sciences, investing heavily in R&D. Today, it allocates 2.7% of its gross domestic product toward this end. This commitment has led to the growth of Germany's research institutions, graduate programs, and international collaborations. The government's Exzellenzinitiative, which commits 2.7 billion Euros over 5 years for German universities that are the most active in research, is just one example. Nevertheless, the nation's growing need for well-trained and highly educated people raises the question of whether Germany is doing enough to support its future scientific leaders. The economic downturn threatens to decrease research career opportunities at a time when building scientific capacity to tackle global challenges has become a high priority.

Ten years ago, the German National Academy of Sciences Leopoldina and the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities recognized that nurturing young scientists would be the key to rebuilding a strong and competitive scientific environment. They created Die Junge Akademie (the Young Academy), an organization intended to harness the resources of both academies in ways that would fertilize research fields with new ideas and bolster career pathways, as well as invigorate older academies by involving the young scientific community in critical policy-related work.

Indeed, for the past decade, the German Young Academy has enabled young scientists to work together across disciplines and geographical boundaries. Many problems that countries share—tackling climate change and environmental degradation, securing new energy and food sources, and promoting health—require answers that will only come from interdisciplinary approaches. The Young Academy has also established itself as an effective voice of the scientific community. Surprisingly, it has sometimes been a more effective advocate for science than the older academies, as reflected by the new Junior Professorships established in almost all German universities. The Young Academy has also become a principal point of contact for other organizations involved in higher education and research. Young Academy members are involved in public events that promote dialogue between science and society, inspiring scientists to engage more energetically with the public and media. And the members are increasingly active internationally, facilitating an exchange of ideas between researchers, business, and policy-makers, and stimulating the formation of similar young academies in other nations.

In the past few years, there has been a substantial increase in successful applications by young German scientists for support from the European Research Council. This positive trend can probably be attributed to multiple efforts that support young scientists in Germany. But the success of the Young Academy should be judged much more broadly. The foundation of the Young Academy was designed “to help young scientists develop a fuller view of the scientific universe; to give this view human meaning by associating it with faces and friends; to remind them that science is an endeavour of freely organized minds; and to urge them to take this spirit to the scientific community at large.”*

In practice, the Young Academy has more than fulfilled this vision. It has given young academics an effective voice in the political, scientific, and public dialogue about their future career pathways. It has stimulated an awareness of and commitment to interdisciplinary working relationships, which are indispensable for tackling future challenges and needs. And it has generated a new culture of cooperation between scientists. The idea of a Young Academy has been spreading around the globe, because every nation must support and develop its younger scientists, promoting their national and international mobility, competitiveness, and leadership potential.**

– Volker ter Meulen and Günter Stock

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