Ladies and gentlemen,
dear colleagues,

Welcome to Bielefeld University! – It is a pleasure receiving you here. Regarding personal interaction and communication, the pandemic years have been full of deprivation. Technical means like video conferences have helped us to carry on with our daily work, but we have also experienced their limitations. For a very long time I have not had the chance to greet such an international crowd of people – so, welcoming you, is a moment of great joy!

But there is far more than my personal happiness which makes your presence here special: The questions and topics you are tackling, touch the grassroots of our university. In 1965 – four years before our university was set up – our “founding father” Helmut Schelsky had put down “guiding principles for a new university”. He wanted nothing less than reforming the relation between rather theoretical academia and practical experience. He wished for his university to be in close and manifold contact with its social environment.

Living up to this “reform spirit” Bielefeld University has brought up many innovative ideas to bridge theory and practice. Some of them – although promising and recognized within their community – had to be stopped early on. (One example: Bielefeld model of Law studies which tied

---

together theoretical and practical learning came to an end because the state was facing a difficult financial situation).

Laborschule and Oberstufenkolleg, however, will celebrate their 50th anniversary in two years! At the very beginning the two schools were an integral part of Bielefeld University. Later on, schools and university became independent entities, but up to now the Laborschule research unit has been a solid bridge between research and practice. A team of researchers and teachers crosses this bridge on a regular basis to research, develop and evaluate teaching and learning. Many new ways of teaching have been the result of this cooperation and have spread out from Laborschule and become state-of-the-art.

Laborschule and Oberstufenkolleg were explicitly set up as schools within a democratic society. Their aim was to guide children to grow into responsible citizens. One of the main shortcomings of the German educational system that the founding generation of these schools wanted to eliminate was the fact that childrens’ social background had a strong impact on their success in school and university. Almost 50 years later we are still far from offering equal opportunities to all children entering school in Germany. The COVID-19 pandemic even worsened the situation in Germany and in many other countries around the world. If one of the first experiences children make with society is that they have no equal opportunities and instead of participating they are excluded, it will be difficult to make them identify with this society and we risk losing them.

This is a real threat to social cohesion and democracy!
I draw hope from seeing researchers and teachers from a dozen or more countries united in this room. It will be hard work for Germany (and every
other country) to change its educational system and strive for more equity. It will be reachable if we cooperate and learn from each other!

In this sense I wish all of you a pleasant stay in Bielefeld and fruitful discussions leading to new ideas for creating a school environment where all children are supported in their growth and are learning according to their needs. – Also, I hope that this conference will be followed by many others and that this international dialogue between research and practice will continue.