

FROM ONLINE SEMESTER TO FLEXIBLE ONLINE SEMESTER

Astonishing things have been achieved at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences over the past three months. This was recently highlighted by President Locker-Grütjen, who praised the combined efforts of students, staff and teachers in making these achievements possible. Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences was forced to scale back operations to the barest minimum, but without grinding to a halt, and at impossibly short notice. Without the support of every teacher, researcher, student and employee at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences, our institution would not have weathered the pandemic so well thus far. Each and every individual contributed to our efforts. It is only thanks to our disciplined adherence to social distancing restrictions and the creativity with which new teaching and work arrangements were implemented that we can all look now, with some measure of hope and optimism, towards the future.

President Locker-Grütjen noted that, in his eyes, the greatest challenge was transitioning *stante pede* to an online semester: without warning, preparation or pilot phase. Yet everyone at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences managed this feat together through an efficient use of resources, additional software tools, and a significant amount of dedication and initiative. The situation remains a constantly evolving challenge, however, and the Coronavirus Task Force, as well as various working groups, Faculty Examination Boards, the digital education working group, AStA and many others remain in close contact to plan and coordinate current and future steps. The pandemic has strengthened the collaboration between the faculties and the Executive Board and led to a deeper mutual trust. The crisis has, in a way, brought Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences closer together.

The possibility of a partial return to campus – in necessary cases and with considerable additional planning – was recently introduced. However, these types of decisions must be continuously adjusted to a dynamic and rapidly changing situation, with changes communicated swiftly to those affected. To that end, a separate section on the University's website was set up for coronavirus-related updates, new informational handouts were drafted, helpful videos were produced and many email circulars, newsletters and a wide range of additional documents were sent out. In countless discussions, meetings and video conferences, the Executive Board has strived to keep everyone at the University informed of new developments, create transparency and address concerns. Yet, understandably, many questions remain. Communication is the Executive Board's chosen method for eliminating uncertainty and its members are committed to continuously improving their approach, thanks in no small part to your feedback. Everyone at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences should also contribute to this process.

President Locker-Grütjen stresses that SARS-CoV-19 remains a threat that we do not fully understand yet. The pandemic crisis has not passed and we cannot afford to become lax in our precautions at the University. Growing hotspots peppered throughout Germany are proof that this danger still exists. As a result, social distancing

and hygienic guidelines will remain in effect at Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences as important safeguards for our health. Extracurricular, non-essential activities remain prohibited on campus.

Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences is planning on rolling out a “flexible online semester” for winter semester 2020-2021. The aim is to permit the faculties a broad range of flexible options to plan and implement what will be, at its heart, a purely digital semester. These options range from select face-to-face activities on campus, to hybrid teaching, to remote teaching and learning. Current hygiene guidelines permit face-to-face activities on campus in certain cases, for example for practicals, examinations, or voluntary curricular offers.

The Executive Board of Rhine-Waal University of Applied Sciences is striving to ensure that no one is left behind in the pandemic. To that end, the president, chancellor and vice-presidents pledge to remain in contact with the faculties, academic and non-academic staff, and, most importantly, the students, as they in particular are undoubtedly the most affected by the pandemic. All of these combined efforts are directed towards a singular purpose: our young people and their success, who should be able to properly commence or continue their studies in spite of the pandemic. That is why planning has begun for a virtual celebration to kick off the winter semester lecture period and a new academic year. President Locker-Grütjen thanks everyone currently hard at work on making this idea a reality.

He is convinced that all of our current efforts will make it possible to transfer this hard-won experience to future endeavours. Digital ideas and new teaching formats can help reshape understanding of education, forging something more cutting-edge, interesting, effective, perhaps producing even greater freedom for future ideas. With this in mind, the importance of the recently-initiated survey of the Centre for Academic Development and Quality (ZfQ) cannot be overstated. Beyond that, President Locker-Grütjen will also be inviting all members of the University in the coming weeks to a Festival of Changes and Innovations, where all of us will be able to contribute our positive experiences over the past months and shape the idea of a new future together.