

Bauhaus4EU Kick Off | 11 March 2025

Peter Benz

Dear all.

I like the word "all". It's such a small word, so easy to be casually not heard, but it is such a powerful, even exceptional term – "all" – because "all" really means every single one of us – without any exception, regardless of gender, age, religion, rank, background; it's an entirely absolute and in no regard relative term, and it is therefore my pleasure to speak to all of you here today.

Dear all, welcome.

Welcome to Weimar, welcome to Bauhaus-Universität Weimar, welcome to all of you for the kick off meeting of the working teams of the Bauhaus4EU European university alliance.

The German poet and Nobel Prize laureate Hermann Hesse coined the phrase:

A magic dwells in each beginning.

And indeed, a magical moment it is: this is the beginning. Look around, these are the people that you share this moment with; these are the people that you will share this memory with.

Some of you may be aware that we did have an inaugural opening ceremony for Bauhaus4EU already on January, 15th of this year in Katowice that was attended by the leadership of all our partners. Yet, we do of course all realise: while the ceremony in Katowice was indeed very dignified and even glamorous – the actual work is done by the people in this room today.

Thus, this here today – and in the coming days – is the real magical beginning – or, hopefully the beginning of the magic?

But, while we hopefully all agree that this is indeed a memorable beginning, the question remains: a beginning of what? After all we – meaning: you – have already been working together for quite some time: I understand the steering committee of Bauhaus4EU has been meeting every Friday morning for – what? – two years? We've been through so many meetings and visits and paperwork together already... not only broadly speaking, we do already have a very solid collaboration going on: so, what's new then?

By the way, a small remark on the side: two weeks ago, I attended a meeting of presidents of university alliances in Brussels. At that occasion, I spoke to one colleague from an alliance that also got funded last year and is also currently kicking off their activities. The major difference for their

alliance is that they actually employed an agency to develop and write the entire application. That agency apparently did a great job, they only spent a couple of months on the entire preparation and got the grant on first try – hats off to that achievement – but now they're actually stuck with their alliance, and they don't even know each other. Have you heard of the Reality TV-show "Married at first Sight"? It's a bit like that.

In our case, we did take the hard way and we did take it twice, but today I'm so much happier to be in a room with people I have actually met before, that we have had the chance to develop institutional relations with, and where we have a solid trust foundation. As the lead institution of this alliance this gives me so much more confidence that we will indeed be able to deliver what we envisioned together. I'm rather certain, other alliances envy us for where we begin...

Anyway, back to my earlier point: what are we beginning?

You may think: we'll start working on joint degrees and staff and student mobilities, and maybe can manage to also squeeze in some research collaborations. Yes, all of that is correct, but we wouldn't have needed a university alliance to do all this.

Now: I'm not sure everyone fully realises, but by forming and formally joining the Bauhaus4EU alliance we have agreed to eventually become one university. Indeed, at the meeting in Brussels two weeks ago, the representatives of the EU even referred to the 65 alliances as the 65 "European universities" – to them we are already one university by the name "Bauhaus4EU".

If you read the paperwork for the alliance properly – as I assume you have – one of the items to be delivered by the end of the project is the establishment of a "joint legal entity". Admittedly, it seems nobody – also at EU level – so far understands what this means concretely... but, in spirit the intention is quite clear: we have committed to become/we already are one institution in ten locations in nine European countries: starting now, we need to realise the potentials that lie within this community, we need to grow together, we need to develop ideas, strategies and processes to act and think as one.

As you hear me saying this, I assume some of you may be thinking: s***, did we really sign this? Well, yes, you did... but also, while this may initially feel daunting, I honestly believe, it's actually not such a bad thing. Frankly, personally I don't even think it's such a difficult thing – not least because – as I stated before – we did actually do our homework and developed a set of shared values, we agreed on common interests, we have a joint vision for where we'd like to go.

For centuries we have referred to "academia" as a kind of virtual network of ideas, values, principles and approaches that interconnects all academics and academic institutions – sometimes without the stakeholders actually being aware of that connection. Picture our alliance as a kind of sub-set of academia based on a carefully curated selection of academic values, principles, approaches that

reflects more specifically the identity of us, of our institutions. Imagine, in the future our alumni – instead of referring to themselves as “academics” – they may identify as “bauhaus4EUers”... and everybody else would go “ah, of course, you stand for cultural sensitivity, intercultural competence, expertise on sustainability, and awareness of regional uniqueness. Cool...”. Yes, that would be pretty cool... I must say though, we do still need to work on the wording: bauhaus4EUers, b4EUs, bauhausers, bowsers... not sure.

However, please don't misunderstand me: this is not merely a branding exercise; this is actually a fundamental shift in how we view our respective institutions within a larger institutional framework.

Personally, I find the concepts of the British philosopher and higher education theorist Roland Barnett to be helpful in making sense of the task ahead. For about the last ten years, Barnett coined the notion of the “ecological university”. I quote from his UNESCO paper “Towards the Ecological University” from 2021:

“The university has to become, in the broadest sense of the idea, an ecological university. [...] It has to become more connected, externally and internally, with the ecosystems with which it is entangled. [...] Externally, the ecological university seeks deliberately to connect with its (eight) main ecosystems – knowledge, social institutions, nature, the economy, culture, persons, learning and the polity. It does this intentionally. Each university will have its own ecological footprint and its own ecological possibilities. Its mission and corporate strategy should be built around this eight-fold set of entanglements. [...] Internally, the ecologically university seeks to unite its disciplines and departments in its ecological quest, and so develop its own trans-disciplinarity.”

I believe there are two points to be taken away from this quote:

Firstly, Barnett uses the term “ecological” not primarily to refer to ideas of “green ecology”; instead, he takes “ecological” as “like an eco-system”. In his view, a university is an eco-system that is intrinsically tied to its surrounding eco-systems of eight different dimensions. I. e. a university cannot be separated from its surroundings; it lives and breathes and grows because of its eco-system – and in return allows the eco-system to live and breathe and grow too. Ideally, an ecological university will eventually entirely dissolve into its eco-systems and will only be discernible through the contributions it makes to the eco-system: knowledge, expertise, values and culture.

Secondly, Barnett repeatedly emphasises that the university eco-system establishes itself “intentionally” and “deliberately”. At another point, Barnett is even more explicit:

“This programme posits the university as real and as ideas (plural). To speak of ideas is to say that the university's development is in part dependent on the imagination. The ecological options for any university have to be discerned and imagined; they do not simply present themselves.”

I repeat "The ecological options for any university have to be discerned and imagined." This effectively implies: we must understand the conditions in which we act and then be creative about them – to the result that we envision. We decide how we engage with our eco-system; we decide how we want to become visible. Thus, very importantly: we're in control, we are the designers, we make the magic.

At this point I'd like to take a final brief detour and share with you my favourite party name: the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional*. The Party of the Institutionalised Revolution held power in Mexico continuously from 1929 to 2000 – but the party as such is not important for my considerations at this moment and – frankly – I don't actually know much about it. The only thing I really like about it, is its name: Institutionalised Revolution.

What a wonderfully ambiguous term! A revolution usually is about breaking down institutions; instead to have a revolution that is an institution?! What kind of institution would that be? What kind of revolution would that be, if it is continuously captured within an institution?

A moment ago, I spoke of universities dissolving into their eco-systems; before that, I pointed out that we have committed to become one university... Aiya, I'm sure, your institution initially won't like that; my institution doesn't like it either. Nonetheless, our times require a revolution. Thus, let's revolutionise our respective institutions, and then institutionalise that revolution... and that's what we will begin today.

A magic dwells in each beginning.

I hope we will conjure quite a lot of magic today and in the coming days that we may then spread to our home institutions – that now are home institutions to all of us.

Thank you all for making your way to Weimar – often despite significant obstacles. I am so happy to see you all.

Let the magic begin.

Thank you very much.