

Recommendation by the  
38th General Assembly  
of the HRK  
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in Fulda

## **Power and Responsibility**

**HRK** German Rectors' Conference  
The Voice of the Universities

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## Preliminary remarks

Various forms of abuse of power have become apparent at universities in recent years. Hierarchies, formal and informal authority and dependencies, especially in the context of the postgraduate qualification process and collaboration in third-party-funded projects, present a high risk of facilitating obvious and subtle forms of abuse of power. Universities and their members therefore bear a high degree of responsibility in the organisation of positions of power.

Specific examples of abuse of power at universities include the unauthorised appropriation of a dependent person's intellectual property and problematic research practices. The abuse of power at universities also takes forms that are familiar to other organisations and employers, from unlawful demands for overtime to discrimination, humiliation and degradation or sexual or sexualised or verbal harassment. Abuse of power can take place, often by exploiting social role perceptions, both between hierarchical levels and between members of the same hierarchical level. All members of universities can be affected by abuse of power: employees in technology and administration, professors, students or academic staff.

Professors are often disciplinary and academic supervisors and reviewers of qualification theses in one person and often have sole discretion to decide on contract extensions. Universities therefore have a particular responsibility to establish a positive leadership culture and to critically reflect on and potentially reorganise existing working and supervisory relationships in order to prevent and adequately counter abuse of power. The public debate about the abuse of power at universities has recently often focused on abusive behaviour towards students and academics at the beginning of their careers. If individuals have a lack of experience in working and supervisory relationships, it is difficult for them to assess what adequate academic supervision, respectful social interaction and adequate access to the necessary resources should look like.

At HRK level, university leaders have been addressing various forms of abuse of power for a long time. In 2012, the HRK Executive Board made a recommendation on ways to avoid dependency relationships that are susceptible to abuse in the doctoral

education phase, for example<sup>1</sup>. The 2018 General Assembly adopted a formal position on sexualised discrimination and sexual harassment at universities<sup>2</sup>. Individual federal states<sup>3</sup> and many universities have taken decisive action. In the DFG's code of Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice, "Guideline 4: Responsibility of the leaders of work units"<sup>4</sup> presents relevant guidance. University-based initiatives have also submitted proposals for effective measures<sup>5</sup>. Nevertheless, the abuse of power at universities remains a grievance and it is crucial that efforts to curb the abuse of power are continuously improved and intensified. The proposed measures and their consistent implementation are intended to contribute to this.

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<sup>1</sup> On quality assurance in doctoral examination procedures, recommendation of the HRK Executive Board to higher education institutions entitled to confer doctorates, 23/04/2012

<sup>2</sup> Against Sexualised Discrimination and Sexual Harassment at Universities, Recommendation of the 24th General Assembly of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK), 24/04/2018

<sup>3</sup> Declaration of commitment by North Rhine-Westphalian universities on dealing with abuse of power

<sup>4</sup> Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice (Code), DFG, September 2019

<sup>5</sup> Professors against abuse of power at universities – an open letter, <https://zeitgeschichte-online.de/themen/professorinnen-gegen-machtmissbrauch-universitaeten>; Recommendation for action on tackling sexualised discrimination and violence at universities of art and music, bukof, <https://bukof.de/wp-content/uploads/23-04-18-bukof-Handlungsempfehlungen-zum-Umgang-mit-Sexualisierter-Diskriminierung-und-Gewalt-an-Kunst-und-Musikhochschulen.pdf>; Policy paper on sexualised discrimination and violence at universities, bukof, June 2022 [https://bukof.de/wp-content/uploads/22-06-Grundsatzpapier-SDG\\_aktualisiert.pdf](https://bukof.de/wp-content/uploads/22-06-Grundsatzpapier-SDG_aktualisiert.pdf); Netzwerk gegen Machtmissbrauch in der Wissenschaft, <https://www.netzwerk-mawi.de/> Position paper and recommendations for action of the Conference of Rectors of German Music Schools (RKM) on tackling abuse of power at universities of music, May 2024: [https://die-deutschen-musikhochschulen.de/wp-content/uploads/PM\\_RKM-Sommerkonferenz\\_Positionspapier\\_Machtmissbrauch\\_an\\_Musikhochschulen.pdf](https://die-deutschen-musikhochschulen.de/wp-content/uploads/PM_RKM-Sommerkonferenz_Positionspapier_Machtmissbrauch_an_Musikhochschulen.pdf)

## Measures

Universities implement concrete measures to prevent abuse of power, to make it visible if it occurs and to consistently sanction misconduct and provide the best possible support for those affected.

1. **Positioning.** Universities take a clear stance against the abuse of power, especially in relationships of dependency. Forms of abuse of power are clearly named; they are contrasted with equally clearly named examples of positive behaviour. Universities make a positive leadership culture visible and thus establish a culture of naturally abuse-free and respectful interaction.
2. **Awareness-raising and involvement, systematic continuing education and training.** Universities address their members on issues of abuse of power, its effects and measures to recognise and take action against abuse of power. They address the responsibility of all members of the university, in particular persons with management responsibility or in positions of power, including the responsibility of persons who witness the abuse of power as "bystanders". There is also a need for regular training and education for all university members, especially counselling staff at universities.
3. **Transparency, low threshold and empowerment.** Universities implement transparent and easy-to-find guidelines and procedures for reporting cases of abuse of power. This includes the appointment of a person and/or a body to act as a point of contact. This task can be assumed by existing internal or external bodies, provided that it is guaranteed that they are authorised under federal state law to protect the anonymity of reporting persons. For binding sanctions, it is necessary that complaints are submitted by name and with a description of the exact facts. Those affected need time and good counselling to develop the courage to come forward by name. Universities therefore offer support to affected individuals and support them in their personal decision about opening a formal reporting procedure and create transparency about the individual steps of the procedure.
4. **Keeping disadvantaged groups in mind.** People who are particularly at risk of experiencing discrimination because of their religious, sexual or gender orientation, their gender or their cultural, linguistic or social background, as well as physical or mental disabilities, are also particularly at risk of

becoming victims of abuse of power. Universities critically reflect on all existing and new measures in terms of their accessibility for disadvantaged groups and adapt them where appropriate. Where necessary, measures are developed for specific target groups.

5. **Information and standardisation.** Universities provide their students, doctoral candidates and postdoctoral researchers and their supervisors with guidelines with which they discuss and document the progress of the qualification work as well as the provision of resources and the tasks of supervisors and supervisees in an objective, structured and transparent manner at regular intervals.
6. **Identification, evaluation and reflection.** Universities regularly review and evaluate their measures to prevent abuse of power and their complaints channels, reflect on their effectiveness and improve the measures on an ongoing basis.