

15 May 2024**Power and responsibility: HRK adopts recommendation on measures against abuse of power**

Cases of abuse of power at universities, especially against students and junior researchers, in recent years make it clear that a continuous review and, if necessary, an expansion of existing protective measures is necessary. At its meeting in Fulda yesterday, the General Assembly of the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) therefore adopted a recommendation on measures to make the abuse of power visible, sanction and prevent it, and provide the best possible support for those affected.

The HRK paper "Power and Responsibility" identifies hierarchies, formal and informal authority and other dependencies as risk factors that can favour the abuse of power in a university context, particularly in connection with the postgraduate qualification process and collaboration in third-party-funded projects. Unauthorised appropriation of intellectual property from dependent persons and problematic research practices are also cited as forms of abuse of power specific to academia.

The President of the HRK, Prof Dr Walter Rosenthal, explained today in Berlin: "The management and guidance of staff and students, as well as other positions of power and decision-making, require a high degree of individual and institutional responsibility – especially as the resulting dependencies cannot be completely dissolved structurally. Universities have already done a lot to improve the prevention, investigation and penalisation of abuse of power. But we can and intend to get even better."

Prof Dr Susanne Menzel-Riedl, HRK Vice President for the Higher Education System and Organisation, emphasises: "Universities are at the centre of society. For this reason, they are also subject to forms of abuse of power that can occur in all social contexts: from the inadmissible demand for extra work and unequal treatment in the team to discrimination, humiliation or sexualised violence. In addition to the clear positioning of university leaders, the countermeasures we recommend include awareness-raising and involvement, training, systematic continuing education and empowerment of university members."

At its meeting in Berlin in November 2023, the HRK General Assembly reaffirmed the special responsibility of rector's offices and executive boards to take decisive action against the abuse of power at universities. The Standing Committee on Organisation and Governance was tasked with drawing up proposals for the further development and improvement of existing procedures. These have now been adopted.

"These recommendations are a very important intermediate step. They must now be implemented," says Menzel-Riedl. "We agree that further changes will be necessary at universities. In future, for example, the HRK will also look at how dependencies can be reduced in the academic qualification system. We will also address the structural integration and promotion of the independence of employees alongside the professorship."

[View text of the recommendation](#)