

Joint Position Paper of the *Allgemeiner Fakultätentag* (Combined Faculties Association), the *Fakultätentag* (Faculties Association) and the *Deutscher Hochschulverband* (German Association of University Professors and Lecturers)

of 9th July 2012

**Good academic practice in the context of theses submitted
for a degree**

I. Preamble

Academia must increasingly take care of itself: nationally and internationally, it has been shaken by forgery and plagiarism scandals, some of which have received considerable attention in the media. The digital revolution facilitates plagiarism while at the same time facilitating its detection. The spectrum of academic misconduct in academic publications ranges from full plagiarism and deliberate falsification of data to cases whose assessment has been the subject of controversy in the academic community; misdemeanours committed by academic authors have been described as contrary to academic standards or ethics. Such grey areas and disputes demonstrate that the essential requirements for academic work cannot be taken for granted. On the contrary, it is widely held that such requirements are open to various interpretations, and that in some cases it might even be necessary to subject requirements to exegetical scrutiny. We therefore need to make sure we know exactly what constitutes academic work and how such work can be conducted in conformity with accepted standards.

With this in mind, the Combined Faculties Association, the Faculties Association and the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers have taken account of the peculiarities and predominant cultures of each discipline, and have reached an understanding on cross-disciplinary principles of good academic practice. They want to restrict these principles to academic theses written, supervised and submitted for a degree in German universities. The principles offer guidelines for examiners¹ and examinees, scholars and

¹ Verbum hoc si quis tam masculos quam feminas complectitur (Corpus Iuris Civilis Dig. L, 16,1)

students. In many respects, however, they are applicable not only to academic theses, but to any scholarly publication.

The undersigned institutions have taken on this task because they believe it is essential for scholarship in a free community that the academics, not the state, should be responsible for defining and ensuring abidance by academic standards. As thesis supervisors, professors in particular have a duty to set up general rules of good academic practice, and they ought to set an example by observing these rules in teaching and research. They need to ensure that undergraduates, promising graduate students and junior researchers are familiarized with the rules of good academic practice and learn to detect the tell-tale signs of academic misconduct.

II. Principles of good academic practice

Science and scholarship are a quest for truth. Honesty in dealing with facts, figures and intellectual ownership is the essence of scholarship. Honesty in the quest for truth and in the transmission of academic knowledge is the basis of scholarly work. In order to have the right to participate in academic discourse, scholars have to observe the rules of good academic practice. Those who infringe the rules transgress the boundary that separates the scholarly from the unscholarly.

Every infringement of academic integrity is detrimental to the credibility of scholarship and tarnishes the public image of academia as a whole. Academic misconduct damages not only the reputation of the culprit, but also that of the universities and the entire academic community. Looking the other way is itself a form of academic misconduct.

The basic rules of academic work are the same in all academic disciplines. The overriding principle is honesty towards oneself and others. Research findings must be properly documented so that they can be verified; the same applies to sources and interpretations. Scholars should, as a matter of course, be prepared to question their own findings systematically. Scholars should never suppress facts and scientific arguments which cast doubt on their own working hypotheses.

III. Good academic practice for writing academic theses

In German-speaking countries the four main types of thesis are the Bachelor's thesis, the Master's thesis, the doctoral thesis, and the postdoctoral thesis (*Habilitationsschrift*). They have different functions within the university, and are subject to different standards of evaluation. However, the following basic rules for academic work apply to all of them.

1) Originality and Independence

Originality and independence are in principle the most important criteria by which the quality of academic work is assessed. These criteria will have to be made stricter and adapted to the level of the academic work to which they are applied.

In the humanities and social sciences, however, the quality of an academic thesis is also judged by an author's ability to re-express the ideas of previous researchers in his/her own words; people who submit theses are also expected to set their own findings in relation to those of other scholars. Authors who wish to appropriate other people's ideas and findings have no choice but to provide precise bibliographical information when they quote from or refer to their sources.

In natural sciences and engineering, originality and independence are demonstrated in experimental design, the critical analysis and assessment of data, the achievement of results through the application of sophisticated methods, and the ability to set one's own research findings in relation to those of other scholars..

2) Research and Citation

All academic theses require correct and careful research as well as citation or referencing. Borrowed intellectual property ought to be clearly and consistently designated as such.

3) Influences

The author of a thesis should disclose evidence concerning all the (external) factors which might lead an unbiased observer to suspect that the findings reported in the thesis were not achieved through independent academic work. It would also be useful to indicate whether work on the thesis was assisted by a grant, a scholarship or external funds.

4) Attribution of statements

One of the basic rules to be observed here is that statements ascribed to other authors have to be cited with the utmost accuracy and should always correspond to the truth.

5) Translation

Translations should always be accompanied by precise references to original sources. In cases where a translation merely gives the gist of a text, care must be taken to ensure that nothing is falsely ascribed to the author of the source text. Authors who rely on other people's translations should make this clear.

6) The traditional stock of knowledge of an academic discipline

It is unnecessary to include quotations or references which merely demonstrate familiarity with facts and ideas which are traditional common knowledge in the academic discipline concerned. Decisions about what constitutes the traditional stock of knowledge of a discipline will be taken on a case to case basis by scholars who are recognized authorities in the fields of inquiry which fall within the purview of the discipline concerned.

7) Plagiarism and data manipulation

Plagiarism, i.e. the theft of intellectual property, constitutes an infringement of the rules for good practice in academic writing. The same applies to the manipulation of data. As a rule, plagiarism and data manipulation are regarded as examination offences (i.e. attempts to breach assessment regulations).

8) Texts written by the author of a thesis

An author infringes the rules for good academic practice when he/she reproduces texts or parts of texts from his own previous writings without indicating the source of this material. Examination regulations may bar candidates from reusing their own texts in a thesis. This is particularly true for doctoral theses.

9) "Ghostwriting"

An academic writer commits a serious breach of the rules for good practice when he/she conspires with a person who contributes texts or pieces of text to a thesis and allows the author to pass this material off as his/her own work.

10) Multiple authorship

When multiple-authored work is submitted as a thesis, the contribution of each author must be clearly indicated. A person cannot be considered as an author unless he/she has made a substantial contribution to the work in question. It is a breach of academic rules to

claim honorary authorship without having made a substantial contribution to a work. The same observation can be made about persons whose claims to authorship are based solely on their hierarchical superiority.

11) Dual Responsibility

As far as compliance with the basic rules for good practice in academic writing is concerned, the main responsibility rests with the author of a thesis. Nonetheless, supervisors and examiners also have to shoulder part of the responsibility. Before candidates set to work on their theses, the supervisor ought to draw their attention to the basic rules for good practice. If necessary, the rules ought to be explained. Supervisors and examiners should also look into cases where there are good grounds for believing that the rules in question have been infringed.

Within the limits set by examination regulations and laws relating to examinations in general, supervisory work can be (partially) delegated. However, the examiner's ultimate responsibility is highly personal and cannot be delegated. In order to be able to make a competent assessment of certain sub-domains, the examiner may, of course, seek the advice of another scholar on specialist questions. This kind of situation may arise when work on a thesis has been undertaken as part of a cross-disciplinary project.

Bonn, 9th July 2012

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