

Recommendation by the
24th General Assembly of
the German Rectors'
Conference (HRK)
on 24 April 2018
in Mannheim

**Against sexual
discrimination and
sexual harassment
at universities**

HRK German Rectors' Conference

The Voice of the Universities

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Due to the supervisory and dependency relationships that exist at higher education institutions, they are vulnerable to various forms of abuse of power. The HRK will address the whole spectrum of these forms and the issues they raise in a statement at a later date.

In this present document, the higher education institutions take a position that explicitly opposes sexual harassment and sexual abuse, in particular by sexual discrimination and sexually degrading actions and behaviour.

Such sexually discriminating and degrading actions and behaviour occur particularly in the following forms:

- Sexual discrimination (disparagement or discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation or gender identity)
- Sexual harassment (verbal and physical assaults on the person)
- Sexual violence (coercion and rape)¹.

The experience of sexual assault can have far-reaching and, in many cases, enduring physical, psychological and economic impacts on those affected, and can significantly reduce health, quality of life and functioning and the realisation of career prospects. This raises the question of the responsibility of individual higher education institutions in relation to the social problem of abuse. Higher education institutions are meeting this responsibility.

A particular vulnerability exists especially in the context of higher education because special relationships of dependency exist both for students and in the post-doctoral training phase. This can be due, for example, to the fact that the same person has the role of both supervisor and superior, and can also have an impact on the academic community beyond individual higher education institutions. In this respect, and also in respect of technical and administrative and academic staff, higher education institutions must design their structures in such a way that the danger of abuse of power through hierarchical structures is minimised. The same applies to relationships between students.

In its body of recommendations, the HRK has repeatedly named aspects designed to prevent the abuse of power, which have fed into these key points. Furthermore, inter-university exchange is to be initiated in the HRK on good practice solutions and when establishing quality standards.²

I.

¹ For example, guidelines on discrimination and sexual violence, University of Konstanz.

² As an example of general measures: Was tun bei sexueller Belästigung am Arbeitsplatz (What to do when sexual harassment occurs in the workplace), Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency, 2nd edition 2016 (available only in German).

Every higher education institution must do its utmost to protect its employees and students from sexual discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual violence.

A culture of respect and esteem for students, early career researchers and academic and non-academic staff that is practised daily is a critical prerequisite for this.

In addition, university-wide guidelines³ should be adopted requiring respectful and professional interaction between all individuals. Awareness-raising activities and preventative measures must be established; there must be clear sanctions for breaches and points of contact must be provided for people affected. Higher education institutions should provide ongoing counselling for those affected and the people they confide in. The first points of contact must be clearly communicated throughout the university. If sexual discrimination and violence occur, those affected are to be encouraged to make contact with these staff.

Specific complaints can also be directed to all persons in a management or supervisory role at the higher education institution. The Equal Opportunity Officer and counselling office can be first points of contact for confidential counselling and they should provide guidance through the process where appropriate.

Transparent procedures and adequate facilities are required above all for consultation hours and types of learning that require individual contact with teaching staff (e.g. medicine, music, psychology, sport) in order to prevent sexual assault.

Similarly, excursions (and conference trips), in which the group dynamic can lead to semi-private situations, are to be considered with particular sensitivity. Participation by several members of teaching staff may help prevent assaults.

II.

Procedures at higher education institutions are to be designed in such a way as to prevent the abuse of power, and the sexually discriminating and degrading actions and types of conduct that arise from it.

³ See for example Richtlinie gegen sexualisierte Diskriminierung und Gewalt (Guidelines on sexual discrimination and violence), University of Bielefeld, 2001; Richtlinie gegen sexualisierte Diskriminierung, Belästigung und Gewalt (Guidelines on sexual discrimination, harassment and violence), University of Greifswald, 2016; Senatsrichtlinie zum Schutz vor sexueller Belästigung, Diskriminierung und Gewalt am Arbeitsplatz und Studienort (Senate guidelines on protection against sexual harassment, discrimination and violence in the workplace and place of study), University of Trier, 2016 (all available only in German).

A particular danger of offensive conduct exists in relationships between fixed-term staff in qualifying positions and their supervisors, on whom they are particularly dependent, making it even harder to defend against this conduct.

Higher education institutions have a particular obligation to uphold the higher education institution as a non-violent sphere in which people can develop freely and not be vulnerable to particular risks due to hierarchical structures.

Management training for leaders so that they can carry out their leadership roles with the appropriate sensitivity towards the possibility of abuse of power is an important step towards this goal. In addition, mentoring programmes and coaching options should be used to assist in making suitable trustworthy people available as points of contact for students, early career researchers and academic and non-academic staff.

III.

Furthermore, the HRK has already adopted recommendations for the post-doctoral training phase that also serve to prevent sexual discrimination, sexual harassment and sexual violence⁴.

⁴ Frauen fördern (Advancement of women), recommendation of the 209th Plenary Assembly of the HRK on 14/11/2006 (available only in German); On quality assurance in doctoral examination procedures, recommendation of the HRK Executive Board to higher education institutions entitled to confer doctorates, 2012.