

UniReport



Goethe-Universität | Frankfurt am Main

Satzungen und Ordnungen

Science at Goethe University Frankfurt: Between individual freedom and social responsibility¹

Adopted by the Executive Board on October 1, 2024, following consultations with the Senate and the University Council

Preamble

Goethe University's mission statement, which dates back to 2014, needs to be updated, concretized and re-interpreted when it comes to passages describing the interface to society. Our university's academic self-image is based on the dynamic development and diverse interaction within, between and among disciplines. It is precisely this interaction and diversity that enables the university to produce scientifically excellent research results in a rapidly changing environment, and to find answers to the pressing problems of our time in interaction with society. Goethe University can only live up to this aspiration if potential internal and external threats to academic and scientific freedom are clearly identified. There can be no unlimited autonomy – responsibility in the end always rests both with the institution and each individual.

1. Our University

Goethe University Frankfurt is a cosmopolitan workshop of the future, committed to innovation and interdisciplinarity. Founded in 1914 by and for citizens, Goethe University has been building on its tradition as an autonomous foundation university since 2008. Our university's mission statement from our centennial year 2014 reflects our self-conception.

Goethe University is guided by the ideas of the Enlightenment and their critical reflections, as well as by democracy and the rule of law. As an institution, it opposes all forms of discrimination and group-related misanthropy. Our mission statement affirms our appreciation of openness and diversity, as well as dialog with all social groups as the basis of our thoughts and actions. Contributing to and receiving impulses from society are a formative part of Goethe University's mission.

Goethe University is committed to the freedom and unity of research and teaching and sees itself as a place where different academic views can confront one another, whereby this confrontation consists of a purely intellectual struggle for knowledge that can be considered essential in the future. We expect all our university's members and affiliates to be prepared to tolerate this use of freedom by others as long as and to the extent that their own fundamental rights or those of third parties are not violated. Resorting to physical or psychological violence, including verbal violence, as an instrument of research or its obstruction is alien to science and such practices will never be tolerated at our university.

2. Our understanding of science

Science is open, and the term itself defies authoritative definition. One essential element is the acceptance of opposing views, deviations and innovations. What can be considered good scientific practice is determined by subject-specific standards, which in turn are derived

¹ **This translation serves informational purposes and transparency. It is not a legally-binding document.**

from procedures that are not conclusively defined but open to development. The minimum requirement of science is a rational, method-driven approach that addresses an existing state of knowledge and aims to generate new knowledge.

At our university, academic freedom protects not just everyone engaged in scientific activities, but also the institution itself from encroachments on their use of freedom. However, not every opinion expressed by a scientist automatically qualifies as a scientific thesis or the outcome of a scientific analysis. In such situation, the context is not one meriting the special protection afforded to academic freedom, but relates to the freedom of opinion, to which everyone is entitled. It is not the responsibility of university officials to define the impact of freedom of expression in the university context, but rather within the framework of general laws. The purely results-oriented pursuit of ideological goals is also not protected by the constitutionally guaranteed academic freedom, whereby the systematic suppression or falsification of facts, sources, views and results serve as indications of alibi or pseudoscience.

In matters pertaining to science, the university management's holds decision-making authority so long as the content is treated differentially and organizationally secured in a manner that precludes any structural threat to academic freedom. In principle, the university management is not entitled to issue instructions that interfere with university lecturers' research and teaching, which is protected by academic freedom. Beyond these areas – which enjoy special protection as fundamental rights – the university must withstand content-related controversies about the process of discovering, interpreting and passing on knowledge and leave the professional evaluation to the community of academics.

While Germany's Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) guarantees extensive academic freedom, there are limits, too. Under specific circumstances, it is possible to restrict this freedom in favor of other goods, some of which are individually rated as more important – including but not limited to human rights, constitutional obligations, the right to physical integrity, freedom of education or the general right of personality. The constitutionally protected legal positions of others must be respected, regardless of whether they are university members or third parties. Violations of this obligation are not protected by academic freedom, but may constitute official misconduct.

The protection of academics guaranteed by academic freedom does not extend to activities and formats that pursue non-scientific objectives. When and whether this is the case cannot be determined in the abstract, but requires a case-by-case analysis that takes the standards of the respective disciplinary culture into account. As per the university's constitution, the initial assessment as to whether such a case exists falls into the responsibility of the relevant actors, who naturally also bear the risk of a misjudgment, which could also be rendered retrospectively. In such cases, there is no reason for the university to make its resources available, since there is no entitlement to use them to express opinions that exceed the scope of academic freedom. If there is a legitimate fear in an individual case that criminal law or service law is likely to be violated, such persons will be excluded from the university's discourse space, in line with its domiciliary rights.

Goethe University guarantees its academics a place where they can conduct science under their own personal responsibility and creatively, and which it defends against attempts at external and internal influence exerted by non-scientific interests. The utilitarian and expedient ideas of third parties must not be allowed to guide institutional action. Aware of the responsibility towards society, the Hessian higher education law provides for the option of subjecting borderline cases to an individual examination of conscience on the consequences of scientific knowledge and research and, in case of doubt, requesting that the scientist behind the work make his or her work available for social examination. However, the mere possibility that knowledge gained in research could be misused by third parties does not justify a restriction of academic freedom under Hessian higher education law.

The university's management protects its members who face restrictions by third parties in their legitimate exercise of academic freedom.

Imprint

UniReport Statutes and Regulations is published irregularly and on special occasions as a special UniReport edition. The circulation is determined separately for each issue.

Publisher: The President of Goethe University Frankfurt