

TALKING TO A WALL: THE RESPONSE OF UNIVERSITIES TO DOCUMENTATIONS OF PLAGIARISM IN DOCTORAL THESES

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The German VroniPlag Wiki group of plagiarism researchers has been documenting plagiarism in doctoral dissertations and other academic works since 2011. Currently, 211 documentations have been published on the web site. Although the press generally only reports on cases involving prominent persons, in particular politicians, only 18 cases have affected people from this group. Much more troubling are the 55 cases that involve people who are or were active as researchers or academics.

When a documentation is published with the author's name, a report is generated and sent along to the university in question. 185 of the cases affect German universities and 26 are from other European countries. The response of the universities has been extremely varied, as the author has previously reported (Dannemann and Weber-Wulff, 2015; Dannemann et al 2018; Weber-Wulff 2012; Weber-Wulff 2014). There have been some rays of light in the darkness, but unfortunately not too many.

There do exist German universities that are able to follow their own, published rules. They acknowledge receipt of a case, keep the informant in the loop about the progress the case has made, and let the informant know how the case has been decided. They also inform the scientific community that the dissertation is problematic by publishing a notice in library catalogues. But there are very few universities that follow through on all of these steps.

At some universities, not even the courtesy of an acknowledgment of receipt is extended. The person notifying the university must ask and re-ask if the report arrived. In one case, the report was printed (in color) and sent registered mail, as no acknowledgement was forthcoming from the university in question. Although generally specified in the statutes of the universities, the person informing the university is often not notified of the final decision. At times, it has been forgotten that

there were even complaints lodged. Unfortunately for those registering complaints, it is impossible to tell the difference between cases that have been forgotten and those that are still being deliberated. Some universities drag the process out over quite a number of years, something that is not good for the author waiting in limbo to see what the university decides.

If the universities do decide to rescind the doctorate and the affected person takes the university to court, the German courts do tend to side with the universities if they were able to follow their own rules during the process. There are now many precedents in law in Germany making clear that plagiarism is grounds for rescinding a doctorate—and for being named.

The process does not end with a legal withdrawal of the doctoral degree. In Germany, doctoral theses must be published and thus may be on the shelves of numerous libraries. Researchers must be informed that the thesis is plagiarized so that they do not base their own work on tainted scholarship. Universities generally have no process to follow in such a case, or if they do, no quality assurance is in place to make sure that the process is followed. Additionally, since a doctorate can be included on state-issued identity cards, there should be a process whereby the university informs the local authorities of the withdrawal.

Very seldom does a university in Germany go through all of the steps required to inform the research world and the civil society of the change of status. This may be caused by the misconceived notion that their job is to protect the former student instead of the integrity of science.

As part of an on-going research endeavor, all universities with open plagiarism cases are being asked about the current state of the investigations. The current status will be presented at the conference.

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