

Leibniz Association Executive Board  
Chausseestraße 111  
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19th July 2024

## Call to Strengthen the Leibniz Association's Commitment to Prevent Power Abuse and Foster a Culture of Respect

*Dear executive board of the Leibniz Association,  
Dear members of the Central Ombuds Committee of the Leibniz Association,  
Dear Prof. Dr. Brockmeier,  
Dear Dr. Böhm,*

As representatives and contact persons for doctoral researchers (DRs) at our institutes, we have witnessed instances of power abuse provoked by the (power) structure inside academia. This has significantly raised our concerns towards the system we are working in. The increased commitment in the prevention of power abuse is in our opinion essential for the Leibniz Association to continue being an attractive employer and fulfilling good scientific practices.

Power abuse and exploitation of dependency relationships have been subject of ongoing concerns and initiatives within the academic community. Previous statements, such as the 2019 *N<sup>2</sup>* declaration against power abuse <sup>[1]</sup>, and the initiative "Professors against power abuse" <sup>[2]</sup> have highlighted the urgency of addressing power dynamics in academia.

Despite these efforts and calls for change, it is disappointing to note that noticeable improvements in preventing power abuse are yet to be realized. This raises questions about the efficacy of existing measures and emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive and effective approach to ensure a safe and respectful working environment.

While expressing our concerns about the current challenges, we also recognize the efforts made by the Leibniz Association to support a positive scientific work environment within its member institutes. Programmes such as the "Leibniz Leadership Academy" and institutionalized support structures such as the "Leibniz Advice Centre" are commendable measures towards fostering a beneficial working environment in science.

In our attempt to prevent the abuse of power structures, we seek the collaboration and support of the Leibniz Association to improve the current situation of DRs. We believe that the Leibniz Association, with its influence and reputation, can play a key role in driving change.

It is evident that the voices of DRs and PostDocs are growing louder, and changes in the academic system are inevitable. We see this as an opportunity for the Leibniz Association to distinguish itself by actively becoming a catalyst for positive change. By leading the way and setting an example, the Leibniz Association has the chance to be at the forefront of change in academia. We encourage the Leibniz Association to join hands with us in this endeavour.

Therefore, we are writing this statement to bring to attention and express our concerns regarding the apparent lack of effective measures to prevent power abuse and exploitation of dependency relationships within the Leibniz Association and its Institutes.

### The Leibniz PhD Network

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## Definition of power abuse

Power abuse in academia involves exploiting one's position of power<sup>[3]</sup> to harm, harass, or discriminate against individuals in lower positions<sup>[4]</sup>. It also includes using power for self-advancement or favouritism, often resulting in unfair treatment and resource allocation. Additionally, power abuse manifests in supervisors pressuring subordinates to work longer hours, carry out illegitimate tasks, or forego essential breaks. Importantly, individuals in power may wield control or punishment with few consequences, creating an environment of fear and discouraging victims from speaking out<sup>[5]</sup>.

## Enabling of power abuse

The dynamics within academia contributing significantly to the prevalence of power abuse have been described previously<sup>[6]</sup>. The concentration of power in the hands of supervisors creates a strong dependency for DRs influencing thesis evaluation, contract decisions, and career advancement. The intense pressure for publication can be wielded as a tool of power by supervisors against DRs exploiting anxiety around publication metrics. Moreover, the prioritization of research skills over leadership skills leaves supervisors ill-equipped to navigate roles with sensitivity and fairness resulting in a lack of proper management of power dynamics. It is alarming that the number of DRs at Leibniz Institutes that have reported being subjected to bullying from a superior has more than doubled (10% vs. 22%) from 2019 to 2021 according to the *N<sup>2</sup>* survey<sup>[7]</sup>.

Scholarship holders are in a particularly precarious situation. In most cases they are not covered by any contract or written working agreement with their institute. No control over working hours, no holiday entitlement, no support services (such as a works council) are just a few examples of the negative aspects associated with the supposed freedom to organize their time. In addition, in some cases the extension of the scholarship is subject to the favourable opinion of their supervisors, which makes scholarship holders even more dependent on their supervisors.

## Solutions to prevent power abuse

For a basic improvement, we advocate for the acknowledgment and clear disavowal of power abuse in academia. Additionally, we emphasize the importance of providing high quality information for international doctoral researchers to alleviate language barriers. Addressing the power held by supervisors, we propose potential measures such as enabling the contract holder – opposed to the supervisor – to initiate the review process of potential contract extension or reducing a supervisor's impact on thesis evaluations through the establishment of a thesis advisory committee.

In our pursuit of a more equitable and supportive academic environment within the Leibniz community, we believe that through collaborative efforts, we can contribute to dismantling conditions fostering power abuse. Together, we aim to create a culture within academia that prioritizes respect, fairness, and the well-being of all its members.

### 1. Acknowledgement of the systematic problem of power abuse

As an initial step, it is inevitable that the Leibniz Association acknowledges the current situation and the systematic issue of power abuse in academia. This is fundamental to support our efforts to build *“the best of all possible worlds”*, starting within the Leibniz Association itself.

### 2. Guideline for the prevention of power abuse

Beyond the existing guidelines for good scientific practice of the Leibniz Association, which briefly address power abuse, we propose the creation of a standalone “Guideline for Prevention of Power Abuse” within the Leibniz Association. This dedicated guideline will provide a more detailed and focused approach offering a precise definition of power abuse, identifying responsible individuals within the organization, implementing preventive measures, and outlining clear consequences for instances of power abuse. We believe that having a separate guideline will enhance clarity and sensitivity towards this critical issue. As a positive example, we refer to the Max-Delbrück-Centre guidelines against harassment<sup>[8]</sup>.

### **3. Guideline for scientific supervision**

Building upon the Leibniz Association's existing comprehensive guidelines for career development, which already encompass significant aspects like the formation of a thesis committee and scientific supervision, we propose the creation of a standalone "Guideline for Scientific Supervision". This devoted guideline will further refine and elaborate on critical elements, such as the introduction of a detailed supervision agreement between DRs and their supervisors, individual development plans for DRs to navigate scientific qualification phases and career prospects, and a transparent definition of tasks in DR work contracts. Recognizing the need for continual improvement, we suggest regular updates of the career development guidelines.

To enhance career development further, we recommend the introduction of an optional, Leibniz internal "Individual Career Development Plan" for DRs and Postdocs, harmonized with the career development guidelines. As an illustrative example for such a development plan, we can look to the Individual Development Plan (IDP) from the University of Hamburg <sup>[9]</sup>. This optional plan aims to provide tailored support and guidance to individuals in their academic journey.

We wish to clarify that our intention is not to entirely recreate the existing Leibniz guidelines, which embody years of experiences and hard work. Instead, we propose a collaborative effort to update, refine, and concertize the existing guidelines to better address the evolving needs and challenges faced by the academic community. To facilitate this process, we invite the Leibniz Association to establish a working group comprising heads of institutes, PIs, postdocs, and DRs. This inclusive working group will provide a platform for productive discussions held on an equal footing, allowing for valuable input from diverse stakeholders and ensuring the guidelines reflect a consensus that benefits the entire academic community within the Leibniz Association.

### **4. Ready-to-use templates**

To further facilitate the practical application of the discussed guidelines, we suggest creating ready-to-use templates and formalized support structures. Equal opportunities officer and ombudsperson are often highly linked to the Institute structures and are also relying on voluntary solutions. We are advocating for an independent organisation outside of the Institutes with clear responsibilities and the capability to introduce binding actions in case of conflict. Valid options for resolving conflicts have to be easily accessible. Such an overarching support structure would offer a valid alternative in case of intra-Institute conflicts of interest, that often deter DRs from publicizing incidents. The templates aim to serve as practical and standardized tools simplifying the application of the guidelines in real-world scenarios. By establishing clear and standardized templates, the Leibniz Association could provide guidance and streamline processes, promoting consistency and coherence in implementing the updated guidelines. This approach ensures that individuals and institutes have accessible resources to navigate complex administrative processes and resolve issues in accordance with the established guidelines.

### **5. Integration of working environment in the evaluation processes**

In order to motivate Leibniz institutes to adhere to and implement the guidelines, we emphasize the importance of integrating power abuse prevention and the promotion of a positive working environment as integral components of Leibniz evaluation. To ensure objectivity in this evaluation, DRs have to be part of the evaluation. To reduce the impact of hierarchies and dependencies we advocate for offering a place in the evaluation committee to DRs from independent sections. To prevent potential repercussion and allowing the participation of DRs without increasing their workload, we would highly suggest to acknowledge this as an advisory task within the spectrum of academic review processes, opposed to a voluntary task to be conducted during their freetime.

We perceive this moment as an opportunity for the Leibniz Association to proactively shape a more progressive and inclusive academic environment for the future.

To foster constructive dialogue and collaboratively explore optimal solutions, we propose organizing a discussion round with the Leibniz executive board. In addition, we will take proactive measures independently to address the challenges faced by DRs.

Finally, as DR representatives within our own institutes, we are actively working to advocate for the implementation of guidelines for the prevention of power abuse and for promoting good supervision in our home institutes. Our goal is to contribute to a positive and supportive academic environment, and we believe that these initiatives will play a significant role in achieving that objective.

Thank you for your attention to these critical matters. We look forward to the prospect of a fruitful and collaborative engagement for the improvement of the Leibniz academic community.

*Respectfully,*

the members of the *Steering Committee and the Working Group Contract Situation & Prevention of Power Abuse* of the Leibniz PhD Network

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