

# Doctorates in Cooperation with Industry

## ("cuckoo's egg" doctorates)



Joint Position Paper with the Arbeitsgemeinschaft Technische Universitäten in Deutschland (ARGE-TU)

June 2017

The right to award a doctorate is – for good reasons – only with the universities and equivalent institutions and is exercised by the relevant faculties. Doctoral theses are supervised by professors who are outstandingly well qualified to do so. It is they who select the most suitable candidates and assign thesis topics. The doctoral procedures are subject to strict quality assurance by faculties and university management. It has consequently been unsettling in recent times to see more and more HR managers in industry discovering the promise of a doctorate as a useful promotional tool. Many job advertisements claim the possibility of a doctorate while failing to mention that the right to award a doctorate has to lie with a university, and in many cases lacking clarity on the supervision arrangements.

The reprehensible practice of "cuckoo's egg" doctorates is at its most blatant where – mostly international – companies advertise their own 'doctoral programmes' in Germany, specifically targeting prospective applicants with the possibility of obtaining a doctorate. Thesis topics are assigned here by the company without consulting an academic supervisor, and expectations are raised not only with regard to supervision, but also with regard to the conferring faculty presiding over the doctorate.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, companies often use confidentiality clauses in an attempt to prevent publication of data and sources essential to a thesis, even though discourse is the basic premise of science. This leaves the 'supervising' professors balancing academic guidelines with the careers of the doctoral candidates involved. Institutes, chairs and universities that are not prepared to award doctorates under these conditions also find themselves excluded in third-party funded projects. Companies incidentally proceed in a similar way with regard to *Diplom* and Master's theses.

The Arbeitsgemeinschaft Technische Universitäten in Deutschland (ARGE-TU) and the universities here represented consider this practice unacceptable. By law, universities and equivalent institutions of higher education hold the exclusive right to award doctorates and sole responsibility for doing so. It is therefore essential that the precepts of good academic practice are also, and in particular, observed by industry partners, especially with regard to the following:

1. Admission to doctoral studies is the exclusive reserve, in law and fact, of the faculty presiding over the doctorate. This applies specifically to the establishment of doctoral candidate status.

---

<sup>1</sup> See also the resolution of the German Association of University Professors and Lecturers (DHV), "Industrial Doctorates: Precepts of good academic practice", <https://www.hochschulverband.de/fileadmin/redaktion/download/pdf/resolutionen/Industriepromotion-english.pdf>

2. Thesis topics are agreed between the doctoral candidate and the professor and not stipulated by outside parties. The latter are at liberty to make suggestions regarding potential thesis topics to a doctorate-granting university or its professors. The assignment of thesis topics by companies is legally unacceptable, as it is to ask participants in a corporate 'doctoral programme' to seek supervisors for thesis topics stipulated by the company at doctorate-granting universities.
3. Scientific and academic findings must stand up to outside scrutiny; confidentiality clauses with regard to a thesis and the related facts and data are inconceivable in discourse-based science.

We, the doctorate-granting universities in the ARGE-TU will not have "cuckoos' eggs" laid in our nest. We will check in each and every case whether a job advertisement associated with the promise of a doctorate constitutes a misrepresentation of the facts. Stipulations as to confidentiality can only be accepted to an extent that does not conflict with the precepts of good academic practice. We are the guarantors that doctorates comply with academic standards.

Cooperation with industry is highly important to us and, as has been seen in the past, can be highly beneficial for both sides. This also applies, within the bounds of our capabilities and principles, for doctorates in cooperation with industry. Without exception, however, companies may only advertise related positions in clear, prior agreement with universities.

For successful cooperation in doctoral studies, we call upon our partners in industry to respect academic standards, for the benefit of our knowledge economy and its development.



Prof. Dr. Dr. h.c. Hans Jürgen Prömel  
Spokesperson, ARGE-TU  
TU9 President



Prof. Dr. med. Wolfgang Schareck  
Deputy Spokesperson, ARGE-TU