

Ethics Charter of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences

Preamble

The Ethics Charter of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences (BOKU) was drafted by the Ethics Platform in a thorough process of consultation (2012-2014) and drawn up in its final form on the basis of a series of intensive discussions involving the entire University. It was approved by the Rectorate and the Senate on March 11, 2015 and March 17, 2015.

The Ethics Charter aims to generate awareness within BOKU and to communicate – internally and externally – that BOKU and its members attach great importance to acting in an ethically considerate manner.

The basic ethical principles, operating values and basic principles compiled in the Ethics Charter provide an ethical foundation and supplement the following guidelines of BOKU: Statutes, BOKU Mission Statement, Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice, BOKU Understanding of Sustainability, Environmental Protection Guideline, Compliance Guideline, Anti-Corruption Guideline, House Rules. The principles cover interaction among the BOKU community, teaching and research.

The present Charter is based on existing, legally binding laws and exceeds or supplements them with the articulation of basic ethical standards, values and principles.

Chapter 1: Aims of the Ethics Charter

The Ethics Charter seeks to sensitize to ethical awareness and responsible action, and to encourage self-scrutiny regarding one's own actions. Its intention is to promote a better understanding of the institutional responsibility incumbent upon BOKU and its institutions, which in turn is influenced by the personal responsibility of the members of the BOKU community. The level of responsibility must increase as the level of freedom enjoyed at the University and the scope and consequences of scientific-technological possibilities increase.

BOKU therefore embodies a culture of communication and exchange that serves to raise sensitivity towards personal responsibility and towards the responsibility of governing bodies. The environment or culture thus created is one in which issues of value can be discussed in a constructive and positive manner that is beneficial to the well-being of all BOKU members, and in which research, teaching and administration can be conducted responsibly and with success.

The BOKU community includes the academic staff, non-academic and technical staff, and the students of BOKU. The governing bodies of BOKU encompass all groups of persons who hold a formal responsibility and role at BOKU. They include, in addition to the University Management (University Council, Rectorate and Senate) and University Administration, e.g. the Departments, Institutes and Research Groups, the Staff Councils, the Equal Opportunities Working Group, the Ombudsman Office and the Union of Students at BOKU (ÖH BOKU). The Ethics Charter articulates normative guiding standards for the actions of all members and institutions of BOKU and graduates of the University. Thus it recognizes that good interaction with others is an important factor for achieving good results in teaching and research.

Chapter 2: Basic Ethical Principles and Values of BOKU

Basic Principles

- **Respect for life**

The members of the BOKU community respect the value of all life and of the earth in all its diversity. Fundamental importance is attached to preserving the stability and performance of the natural balance and well-functioning ecosystems, and to maintaining the diversity and distinctiveness of nature and landscapes, even if natural resources are put to economic or other use in the interest of humans.

- **Non-discrimination**

BOKU commits to achieving equal treatment of all persons and groups in all areas of BOKU, and in particular to providing equal opportunities for socially disadvantaged persons.

- **Sustainability**

Decisions and activities of BOKU members are undertaken in accordance with the principle of sustainability, which is based on the guiding principle of ecologically, economically and socially balanced development (see BOKU Understanding of Sustainability, in progress, initial draft approved by the Senate and Rectorate in the fall of 2014).

- **Responsibility and precaution**

The members of the BOKU community give due consideration to the long-term impacts and consequences of their decisions and actions for people, society, the environment and nature.

- **Truth-seeking**

The search for well-founded scientific insights is the guiding principle for research, teaching and collaboration.

In this context, it is important to create an awareness of both the knowledge-driven and the value-driven dimensions of the research process.

- **Commitment towards civil society**

BOKU aims to foster the positive development of civil society. Research and teaching at BOKU are committed to peaceful goals. Research activities, the development and optimization of technical and social systems, or changes to biological systems, are directed at uses for civil purposes.

Operating values

- **Discourse**

For BOKU, successful discourse is founded on consultation processes that take ethical perspectives into account. The ethical convictions of every single member of BOKU are communicated, taken seriously and respected. This is particularly the case within the context of university discourse. The following aspects are essential for this process: freedom of opinion and statement of reasons as well as factual and pertinent argumentation.

- Freedom of opinion

Ethical discourse and good collaboration at BOKU requires that its members be encouraged to stand up for what they believe to be ethically imperative without having to fear negative repercussions on themselves. To make this possible, obstructive personal behavior will be addressed and, if need be, obstacles created by University structures will be removed.

- Statement of reasons and pertinent argumentation

Value-conscious discussion, transparency and plausibility depend on having the fullest possible information and on clarity of argument.

Freedom to voice one's opinion and freedom of decision entail, particularly in an academic environment, the obligation to give reasons for one's opinions and decisions – at least if this is requested.

- **Fairness**

Fairness for BOKU means respecting the needs and expectations of all members of the BOKU community, and guaranteeing equal opportunities for putting forward opinions and ideas. BOKU therefore embraces a cooperative approach to working with others. Accordingly, BOKU members need to consider their actions from other people's perspective.

- **Interdisciplinary collaboration**

Interdisciplinarity for BOKU means striving for cross-disciplinary perspectives in research and teaching, cooperation and networking, as well as for collaboration with the stakeholders in society for the purpose of identifying ethical and societal challenges, development potential, risks and undesired consequences in good time. These efforts support the development of coherent problem-solving strategies needed by society taking a responsible approach.

- **Participation**

Besides democratic participatory processes, participation at BOKU includes fostering and developing socio-cultural autonomy and the integration of current and future members (Empowerment and Inclusion). BOKU members strive for diversity in terms of participating and sharing in processes – particularly those involving opinion forming, decision making and resources. Participation in scientific teaching practice consistently requires that students be actively involved.

BOKU members therefore support, within the limits of what is legally possible, horizontal and democratic decision-making structures that afford individual members the chance to actively partake in and share responsibility for the University's affairs (see BOKU Mission Statement).

- **Transparency**

For BOKU, transparency involves making processes and decisions clear and plausible. Transparency concerning the knowledge-driven and value-driven dimensions of the research process gives the ability that reliable research findings can be identified and shown, and that teaching contents can be appropriately presented. Transparency relating to the objectives, results, funding bodies and, if appropriate, the contracting entities of conducted research projects preserves the independence of research.

Chapter 3: Basic Principles for Interaction

Principles for interaction among BOKU members

- **Role model function and personal integrity**

The members of the BOKU community examine their actions in terms of their role model function, and the values on which their actions are based in terms of consistency with the principles, basic ethical principles and values set forth in the Ethics Charter of BOKU and with their personal standards. Acting with authenticity and integrity is regarded as a key value.

- **Respect and consideration**

The members of the BOKU community respect each other regardless of their social or health circumstances, requirements of cooperation, personal opinions or value systems and their role at BOKU. This requires that they respect the rights of others and show others compassion and consideration.

- **Cooperative interaction**

At BOKU, the goals of cooperative interaction include respecting the dignity, health, quality of life and professionalism of others and being willing to help each other. Psychological and physical aggression, such as bullying, coercion or harassment, blatantly contradicts the principle of morally acceptable interaction.

- **Appreciative and transparent communication**

Mutual appreciation is reflected in the interaction among members of the BOKU community and is expressed in cooperative and transparent communication. This means being prepared to listen to criticism, being willing to engage in dialogue and discourse, and accepting the relevant rules of discourse.

- **Responsible leadership and collaboration**

Staff members in management roles are aware of their responsibility and foster a tension-free working climate by speaking and making decisions in a considerate manner. All staff members undertake their assigned duties with commitment and work together to solve problems.

Principles for personal conduct towards BOKU

- **Adherence to agreed rules**
The members of the BOKU community adhere to agreed rules. The latter include the BOKU Mission Statement, House Rules, Compliance Guidelines, Rules of Internal Procedure, and the Laboratory Regulations of the single Departments and Institutes.
- **Responsible use of resources**
The members of the BOKU community use the resources of the University wisely and in accordance with BOKU's stated environmental objectives (see Compliance Guideline).

Principles for decision making in governing bodies of BOKU

- **Constructive work in governing bodies**
Constructive work in governing bodies requires transparency, openness, fairness and correctness. In the collective decision-making processes of the self-administrative bodies each individual member recognizes a responsibility to work to the best of his or her knowledge and belief for the benefit of the community and society.
- **Open and transparent opinion forming and decision making**
Managerial staff in governing bodies conduct opinion-forming and decision-making processes in such a way that all members are afforded equal opportunity to put forward their opinions and ideas.

Chapter 4: Basic Principles in Teaching

Principles from the perspective of the teaching staff

- **Conscious pedagogic approach**
Teaching staff are aware of the consequences of their pedagogical actions and of their influence as role models in encouraging students to become critical and responsible human beings.
- **Autonomous and holistic teaching and learning processes**
The teaching staff regard it their duty to foster autonomous and holistic learning processes that enable students to cope with the challenges of the future as best as they possibly can and to contribute to sustainable development.
- **Respectful and fair interaction with students**
Teaching staff are respectful and fair in their interactions with students.

- **Disclosure of insights and value propositions**
Members of the teaching staff foster a critical exchange with students about methodologies, teaching objectives and curricula. They disclose the academic insights and value propositions on which these are based (see “Truth-seeking”).
- **Sustainable development in the focus of teaching**
The topic of ecological, economic and social sustainability is a key element of university education and training at BOKU (see BOKU Understanding of Sustainability).
- **Fair cooperation in teaching**
The efforts invested in teaching across all teaching areas will be allocated in a fair and transparent manner and will be correctly made visible.

Principles from the students’ perspective

- **Appreciation and commitment**
The students appreciate the opportunity of university education afforded to them by society and show appropriate commitment.
- **Respectful treatment of BOKU staff and resources**
The students are respectful and fair in their interactions with BOKU staff members and use the resources of the University carefully.
- **Fair interaction among students**
The students treat each other fairly and adhere to the academic standards (see Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice).

Principles from the perspective of study organization

- **Partnership-based interaction with students**
The Study Organization office of BOKU treats students as partners and is considerate of their needs.
- **Active involvement of students**
The Study Organization office of BOKU takes students seriously and assists them in making decisions and choices, in particular with regard to course options.
- **Good working conditions**
The Study Organization office of BOKU maintains working conditions for students on a high and current level.

Chapter 5: Basic Principles in Research

Freedom of research and responsibility

- **Free research on the basis of ethics and laws**
Researchers at BOKU use their freedom of research taking legal requirements into consideration, guided by a sense of responsibility and reflection on ethical values and principles.
- **Willingness to further educate oneself on ethics**
BOKU researchers, acting on their own responsibility, take the opportunities provided by the University to obtain information, receive training and participate in discussions on ethical topics. They further educate themselves on a regular basis.
- **Counseling and discourse**
If researchers need to clarify concerns about the ethical acceptability of their own research, appropriate counseling will be arranged at BOKU. In the event of conflicts concerning the acceptability of research at BOKU, the University – amongst others the Ethics Platform – will offer support. If necessary, an appropriate University-wide discourse process will be initiated.

Scientific integrity and quality of research

- **Scientific integrity**
Those engaged in research at BOKU feel bound by the criteria of scientific integrity when undertaking research activities. They act in a responsible and fair manner, observing the standards of good scientific practice.
- **Avoidance of conflicts of interest**
The members of the BOKU community avoid conflicts of interest in all research matters, and declare potential conflicts of interest to contracting entities, research funding agencies or to other relevant positions or persons.
- **Protection of independence of research**
The members of the BOKU community ensure that the type of funding for a research project has no unacceptable influence on ethical principles, procedures and research findings. The hierarchy structures within research projects do not pose a threat to the independence of research. Transparency regarding the aims, results, funding bodies and, if applicable, contracting entities of completed research projects will be provided. Research findings that are relevant to society will be published regardless of the political or economic interests of funding bodies or research institutions. Restrictions of this policy through contractual commitments will be kept to a minimum.

Research cooperation at BOKU

- **Fair research in teams**

In their research teams, the researchers endeavor to engage in a fair exchange and to integrate and appreciate the performance of the individual team members from the project fund-raising stage to the publication of the results. The ethical convictions of each and every researcher are taken seriously and respected. This applies in particular to academic discourse in the University. Persons who have managerial authority have a special responsibility to ensure respectful interactions and standards of good scientific practice.

- **Support and promotion of junior scientific staff**

Researchers in established roles at BOKU facilitate and foster the independent scientific development and qualifying research of their scientific staff.

- **Practice orientation and interdisciplinarity**

With a view to social practice, the researchers go beyond their own disciplines when planning and conducting relevant projects, and develop and foster interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary forms of scientifically sound collaboration.

Responsibility of researchers towards society

- **Social responsibility and precaution**

The researchers recognize their responsibility by employing their know-how, experience and skills with utmost care and taking societal values into consideration.

- **Precautionary principle in research**

Adherence to the precautionary principle in research means giving due consideration to the consequences of research and its application. In particular, the risks arising from its high depth of intervention into natural and social processes, and the danger of irreversible damage to nature, the environment, people and society, are given due consideration.

- **Extensive dialogue**

Those engaged in research at BOKU see self-critical dialogue within the scientific community, with social practice representatives and with the public as an obligation and an added value. This approach serves to enhance the quality of research and its societal relevance.

Chapter 6: Supportive Measures for Implementation of the Principles

Supportive measures to address ethical issues and value conflicts

- **Rule-guided discourse on ethical issues**

Ethical issues or concerns that may arise will be discussed in a suitable manner depending on their nature and implications – in a small or large-group setting, internally inside the University or in the University's public. For this purpose, BOKU will provide organizational support, for example via the Ethics Platform. The aim of such meetings or discussion groups is to explore the ethical issue in question, identify

important aspects and develop possible solutions. The outcome will be documented in each case.

- **Discussion process in the case of value conflicts**

Should ethical conflicts arise at BOKU the parties concerned will seek to resolve them through joint discussions. If this measure is unsuccessful, BOKU will assist in arranging a suitable discussion process, for instance via the Ethics Platform, and will provide support – where appropriate with the involvement of outside experts and professional facilitators (mediation). The aim of this discussion process is to elaborate well-reasoned positions, to review them in terms of the basic ethical principles and operating values of the Ethics Charter, and to establish a consensus or explain a justified dissent. The outcome will be documented in each case.

- **Ethics Platform as hub**

The Ethics Platform serves as an engine and driving force for the systematic, participatory and constructive discussion of ethical questions at BOKU.

The key activities of the Ethics Platform are:

- Consideration of ethical questions in connection with BOKU's commitment towards society as a University of Life,
- Ongoing reflection on, and further development of, basic ethical principles and values for research, teaching and development activities at BOKU,
- Promotion of ethical awareness and ethical action at BOKU.

Further supportive measures of BOKU

The initial contact for issues and complaints will be the heads of departments and the governing bodies of the departments. In addition, the following appeal bodies are available:

- **Equal Opportunities Working Group**

Members of the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna (BOKU) can contact the members of the Equal Opportunities Working Group in all issues relating to equal treatment, discrimination, women empowerment, sexual harassment or bullying.

www.boku.ac.at/besondere-organe-und-einrichtungen/arbeitskreis-fuer-gleichbehandlungsfragen-akgl

- **Occupational Psychological Counseling**

In general, occupational psychology is concerned with the interdependencies between work, health and performance. By establishing occupational psychology counseling, BOKU is taking a preventive approach to promote health in the workplace and counteract work situations that are psychologically stressful.

The counseling service encompasses the design of healthy working environments and the development of strategies to reduce psychological stress. Overcoming stress, dealing with conflicts, bullying, current crises or emotional problems may be covered in the counseling sessions.

Individual occupational psychological counseling is free to all staff members at BOKU. In addition, it may be used by managers seeking advice on psychological issues relating to their staff members.

www.boku.ac.at/pers/personalentwicklung/themen/arbeitspsychologische-beratung/

- **Staff Council for Non-Academic Staff and for Academic Staff**

The duties of a works council (Betriebsrat) are defined in the Austrian Labor Constitution Act (Arbeitsverfassungsgesetz, ArbVG). Pursuant to Sec. 38 ArbVG, employee representative bodies, of which the works council is the most important, shall “represent and promote the economic, social, health and cultural interests of the workers in an establishment.”

The duties of a staff representation body for civil servants (Dienststellenausschuss) are defined in the Austrian Staff Representation Act (PVG). As set forth in Sec. 2 PVG, the staff representation body shall generally “safeguard and promote the employees’ professional, economic, social, cultural and health interests. In pursuit of this duty it shall seek to ensure that the laws, regulations, contracts, work rules, decrees and official notices in force are adhered to and executed in the interest of the employees.”

In addition, there are a number of defined participatory rights, for instance in the event of employment termination, a change in operations etc.

www.boku.ac.at/interessensvertretungen/betriebsrat-fuer-das-allgemeine-personal-br-allg/

www.boku.ac.at/interessensvertretungen/betriebsrat-fuer-das-wissenschaftliche-personal-br-wiss/

- **Ombudsman Office for Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice**

Probity in scientific work cannot be guaranteed by a set of rules and regulations. Ultimately, moral responsibility lies with each individual. The Ombudsman Office for Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice at BOKU aims to guarantee a minimum standard of probity to prevent scientific misconduct at BOKU.

The Ombudsman Office operates as a confidential resource which is available to all members of the BOKU community who wish to report a possible case of scientific misconduct. Protecting the dignity and good reputation of all those involved is the overriding principle in such matters.

www.boku.ac.at/fos/themen/ombudsstelle/

- **Arbitration Board**

The Arbitration Board mediates in disputes involving members of the University and deals with complaints from the Equal Opportunities Working Group concerning gender discrimination in connection with a decision of a University body.

www.boku.ac.at/fileadmin/data/H01000/H10220/schiedskommission_gesch.ordnung_v_september_06.pdf

- **Staff Unit for the Support of People with Special Needs**

The integration of students and staff members with special needs is a key concern for the University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences. The Staff Unit was set up to guarantee that people with special needs have equal access to all services and offerings available at BOKU and to remove potential barriers.

www.boku.ac.at/universitaetsleitung/rektorat/stabsstellen/stabstelle-zur-betreuung-von-menschen-mit-besonderen-beduerfnissen/

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March 17, 2015