

Harassment and sexualised violence at Graz University of Technology

Position paper of the student representatives
for doctoral studies (PhD Union)

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Abstract

Sexual harassment and sexualised violence are serious problems at TU Graz. The current PhD Survey and feedback from discussions with the Working Group for Equal Opportunities (AKGleich) show that women are particularly affected, yet existing victim protection measures are inadequate. The failure to implement long-proposed measures leads to a high number of unreported cases and protects perpetrators rather than victims. PhD students face a particular risk: their dependency on supervisors makes it difficult to report incidents and receive support. The PhD Union therefore urgently calls on the university management to take responsibility and introduce effective measures to protect victims, reduce structural power imbalances, and demonstrate a clear stance against harassment at TU Graz.

Sexual harassment at universities is a widespread problem, in Austria too.

Harassment and sexual violence in the workplace are widespread misconduct in the Austrian working world, including universities. Hierarchical structures and a gender imbalance, especially in leadership positions, facilitate abusive behaviour^{1,2}. Although sexual harassment can affect anyone, perpetrators are often male and victims female. A large-scale UNISAFE study³ on gender-based violence, involving 46 participating universities and research institutions in Europe and surveying over 42,000 people, shows that approximately

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62 % of respondents (students and staff) were personally affected at least once during their time at the institution. This study defines gender-based violence as: (1) physical violence, (2) psychological violence, (3) economic violence, (4) rape, (5) sexual harassment, and (6) online violence (see also the UNISAFE study³, page 5). Other studies⁴ suggest that between 30 % and 50 % of all employees are personally affected by harassment and/or sexualised violence at least once in their working lives.

TU Graz is not exempt from this form of violence. A recent survey among all PhD students at TU Graz shows that while men report being victims of sexual harassment in 1 out of 47 cases, the figure for women is 1 out of 5⁵. The PhD Union has reason to believe that TU Graz is taking insufficient measures to combat sexual harassment and sexualised violence. The aim of this position paper is to draw attention to the precarious situation of victims of harassment and sexualised violence and to call upon the responsible bodies to initiate concrete measures for prevention, to protect victims, and to hold perpetrators accountable.

Discussions reveal: TU Graz is also heavily affected by the problem of sexual harassment.

As a contact point for PhD students at TU Graz, the PhD Union has recently received a surge in complaints of sexual harassment. The PhD Union considers these complaints particularly egregious, as, contrary to the common narrative of isolated incidents, they disproportionately affect specific institutes, working groups, and individuals. Also noteworthy is the profound frustration of those affected with the inadequate response from decision-makers, even when these cases are known to AKGleich, the Works Council for Academic and Artistic Staff (BRWiss), and the Rectorate.

To gain a better overview of the situation, the PhD Union requested a meeting with the chairwoman of AKGleich, which took place in the summer semester of 2025. The conversation with AKGleich made the extent of the problem clear: Sexual harassment and sexualised violence occur repeatedly and take on a wide variety of forms, from "cat-calling" to actual assaults.

The main points of the conversation with AKGleich can be summarized as follows:

- **Support services for victims lack executive authority.** AKGleich and BRWiss have approached the Rectorate with several cases. Since AKGleich and BRWiss lack executive power, they can only suggest measures for both perpetrators and victims (e.g., awareness training). Due to privacy concerns, it is often impossible to determine whether these measures are actually implemented. Because many victims anticipate a lack of support, very few actually contact these support services.

- **Victims suffer long and alone.** Victims suffer long and severely from the psychological burden caused by the abuse. If the perpetrator is their supervisor or dissertation advisor, many victims, due to the power imbalance, do not dare to make the incidents public and suffer in silence. Some victims even blame themselves.
- **Victim-perpetrator reversal is a common management strategy.** The general tendency in handling these cases is for perpetrators and management to attempt to portray the perpetrators as victims (victim-perpetrator reversal) or to downplay the incident. Both could be attributed to a lack of awareness regarding harassment and sexualised violence. Disciplinary or employment-related consequences for the perpetrators, such as reprimands or termination of their employment contract, are suppressed or actively prevented. For example, in the case of a convicted criminal, the employment relationship was not terminated because the prison sentence was less than one year (federal civil service act⁶).
- **The words and actions of those in charge diverge.** The university administration does not give cases of sexual harassment the necessary priority. The university administration responds to cases brought to its attention with superficial empathy while protecting the perpetrators behind the scenes. A lack of commitment is sometimes attributed to insufficient financial resources, even though relevant measures are part of the performance agreement with the Federal Ministry and thus included in the budget.
- **The number of unreported cases is high.** Relevant studies show that approximately one-third of all employees are personally affected by harassment and/or sexualised violence at least once during their professional lives, including at universities.³ Given the number of reported cases at TU Graz, it can be assumed that the number of unreported cases is extremely high.

Due to those circumstances, the PhD Union decided to take a position and thus express its clear stance on the issue of harassment and sexualised violence at TU Graz.

Doctoral candidates face particular challenges regarding sexual harassment.

The PhD Union represents all doctoral students at TU Graz and is therefore responsible for taking seriously the issues raised by doctoral candidates and ensuring they are addressed appropriately. The PhD Union's position

takes into account the specific needs of doctoral studies and the unique circumstances associated with them. The following compilation outlines the problems and consequences that doctoral candidates at TU Graz face due to harassment and sexualised violence.

- **Relationships of dependency facilitate unpunished misconduct.** In doctoral projects, there is a strong relationship of dependency between the supervisor and the doctoral candidate. This is especially true because supervisors often secure the project funding on which the dissertation is based, or are even the student's superiors. Doctoral candidates often conceal abuses because they fear lasting negative consequences for their dissertation project.
- **Changing supervisors is difficult to impossible.** Changing supervisors after an incident of harassment is always associated with serious disadvantages for the doctoral candidate. Such a change is not only very administratively burdensome, but it is also often stigmatised. A change costs the doctoral candidate several months, during which they can only work on their dissertation to a limited extent. This is particularly problematic due to the (always) temporary nature of employment contracts. Furthermore, colleagues sometimes indirectly support the misconduct by failing to provide supervision out of fear of negative consequences for themselves. It is not uncommon for doctoral candidates to leave the university without a completed dissertation and without an employment contract.
- **Lack of Processes Prevents Addressing the Issue.** Currently, TU Graz lacks a transparent process for addressing harassment and sexualised violence, defining responsibilities and potential disciplinary measures. Consequently, there are no reporting requirements that could serve as evidence for concrete actions. The absence of such a process also fosters arbitrariness and selective treatment of perpetrators and victims.
- **There is no dedicated complaints office.** At TU Graz, there is currently no clearly defined single point of contact for harassment and sexualised violence. While AKGleich and BRwiss do provide support to victims, their scope of action is severely limited (e.g., counselling). A clearly defined body that addresses these cases and ensures they are treated is lacking.
- **The university administration protects perpetrators, not victims.** Superficial empathy is not a suitable tool for dealing with cases of harassment or sexualised violence. Ultimately, the rectorate protects professors if they are perpetrators and abandons the victims. An

executive body is needed that can implement potentially unpopular measures against perpetrators without risking dismissal or harassment.

The PhD Union takes a stand against sexual harassment and calls on those responsible to take action!

The PhD Union unequivocally states that all forms of violence are fundamentally unacceptable, regardless of whether the perpetrators perceive them as such. This applies particularly to discrimination, harassment, and sexualised violence, which usually occurs in secret, all too often remains invisible, and causes lasting damage to the mental health of the victims. Universities serve society and have a duty to promote its positive development and support it in addressing evolving tasks and challenges (similar to the Austrian Universities Act 2002, § 1⁷). Given this leading role and the exemplary nature of universities for society, the toleration of such misconduct by perpetrators and the disregard for victims must be countered immediately, decisively, and with sustainable measures.

Like every other student representation within the Students Union at TU Graz (HTU), the PhD Union is interested in a constructive solution to this problem and an effective approach to addressing misconduct. Therefore, this document not only addresses problems but also offers constructive suggestions for improving the current situation.

The PhD Union sees great potential in a variety of possible measures.

The PhD Union sees the establishment of a process to effectively address the problem of harassment and sexualised violence as a key solution. Partner universities such as the University of Graz have already implemented similar processes that can serve as models⁸. This process should be based on the following cornerstones:

1. A **single point of contact** must be established, and responsibilities must be clearly defined.
2. An **arbitration panel** must be established to resolve disputes.
3. **Measures** for disciplinary action and victim protection must be **documented** in writing and **made public**.
4. A **reporting system** must be established that provides regular reports to the Rectorate, the University Council, and the supervisory authority.

5. All information regarding the process must be presented **transparently and comprehensibly** (e.g., TU4U).
6. The **perpetrator's behaviour** must be **documented** (e.g., by entry in the personnel file).
7. It is **mandatory** to offer **awareness-raising measures** to all employees at TU Graz.
8. The **process** must be regularly **evaluated**, above all externally.

In the following, we would like to explain in more detail the points regarding the contact point (1), the executive body (2), possible measures for perpetrators and victims (3), and the transparent documentation of the process (5).

Contact point. We demand the establishment of a clearly and easily identifiable contact point responsible for all forms of violence (physical or psychological), discrimination, harassment, and sexualised violence. This office must document all incoming cases (taking into account victim and data protection) and report them to the Rectorate and the University Council. Furthermore, the office must forward all cases to the responsible executive body (see below).

Executive body. We propose establishing an executive body to take over documented cases from the contact point and translate them into concrete measures. Examples may include referring disputes to arbitration and issuing reprimands to the perpetrator (entry in their official file). This body would be independent in its work from the university administration, deans, and professors (similar to BRWiss). It should be equipped with personnel authority and thus empowered to order and implement disciplinary and employment-related measures (e.g., reprimands, dismissal) and evaluate the results of their implementation.

Documentation of the process. All measures for perpetrators and victims must be clearly and unambiguously defined and made accessible to all TU Graz employees (e.g., TU4U). Furthermore, suitable training measures must demonstrably ensure that all employees understand the issue itself and the consequences of misconduct (similar to existing TeachCenter courses, for example, on the data protection law).

Measures for perpetrators. Possible measures for perpetrators, from the perspective of the PhD Union, include:

1. Mandatory awareness training on harassment and sexualised violence.

2. Temporary or permanent suspension of supervisory authority for PhD students.
3. Reductions in global research funding and/or personnel budgets.
4. Reprimand with entry in the employee's service record.
5. Termination of the employment contract within the statutory notice period.
6. Immediate employment contract termination and a ban on entering the campus.

Measures for victims. Possible measures for victims, from the perspective of the PhD Union, include:

1. Reimbursement of costs for psychotherapeutic services by TU Graz.
2. Conversion of the fixed-term employment contract to a permanent one (if requested by the victim).
3. Financial support for the dissertation project through a special fund, from which funds are withdrawn from the perpetrator.
4. Right to paid therapeutic leave of several weeks.
5. Right to change supervisor and/or dissertation advisor.
6. Right to two additional semesters of grace for studies.

The PhD Union has made it its mission to closely monitor the development of these measures.

With this position paper, the PhD Union emphasises the urgent need to improve the situation regarding sexual harassment and sexualised violence at TU Graz and calls on those responsible to implement concrete changes. Mere lip service and media-friendly announcements are insufficient. The PhD Union will closely monitor and evaluate the development and implementation of future measures and intervene if necessary.

Information about the document

This document is a translation of the original German document. Linguistic adjustments have been made to improve readability and comprehensibility. Any resulting changes to the content are unintentional.

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