Directive on Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice at the NW-FVA

As of: 1st of June 2025

In agreement with the staff councils of the Northwest German Forest Research Institute (hereinafter referred to as NW-FVA), the following regulations for safeguarding good scientific practice at the NW-FVA are introduced as binding guidelines for scientific work at this institution.

Vision for Research and Development

The NW-FVA is a cross-state research institution of the federal states of Hesse, Lower Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt, and Schleswig-Holstein (member states). The basis for this cross-state cooperation is a treaty, the implementation of which is overseen by a steering committee exercising technical supervision.

The NW-FVA is responsible, on behalf of the member states, for initiating, conducting, and coordinating research and development to support sustainable and multifunctional forest management. It serves as the interface between science and practice. Core tasks include applied research, long-term monitoring, and knowledge exchange with practitioners.

The NW-FVA primarily sees itself as a competence and service centre for forest enterprises of all ownership types, forest owners, administrations, and policymakers in its member states.

Preamble

Based on the recommendations of the German Research Foundation (DFG), particularly the Code of Conduct "Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice" in the version dated April 2022 (corrected version 1.1), the NW-FVA adheres to the following general principles of good scientific practice in its scientific work to prevent scientific misconduct and promote the quality of scientific work.

The constitutionally guaranteed freedom of science entails the responsibility to organise scientific work in a manner that complies with the principles of ethics, objectivity, and transparency. The principles outlined here describe and establish corresponding standards. The NW-FVA creates suitable framework conditions for good scientific work, including sufficient time and appropriate resources for research and the qualification of early-career researchers, as well as comprehensive access to published research output relevant to the NW-FVA.

Based on the "Model Statutes for Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice and Handling Suspected Cases of Scientific Misconduct" adopted by the 33rd General Assembly of the German Rectors' Conference on 10 May 2022, the following regulations implement the DFG's Code of Conduct "Guidelines for Safeguarding Good Scientific Practice". These regulations are legally binding for all persons engaged in research or research-supporting activities at the NW-FVA. Research staff includes all persons employed as scientific staff, while research-supporting staff includes laboratory, field, and administrative personnel. Hereinafter, these groups are collectively referred to as "scientific personnel", without further distinction between them. This applies to both their rights and obligations.

Section I
Principles of Good Scientific Practice

§ 1
Scope of this Directive

(1) The principles of good scientific practice to be observed under this directive shall be communicated to all personnel at the NW-FVA and published on the NW-FVA website. Upon the entry into force of this directive, all scientifically employed personnel, whether under employment or civil service law, shall additionally be notified by email. Newly appointed staff shall be informed of and provided with this directive upon commencement of their employment.

(2) All scientifically active personnel at the NW-FVA are obliged and responsible for adhering to the rules of good scientific practice set out below.

(3) Other rights and obligations under employment and civil service law remain unaffected by this directive.

§ 2
Principles of Good Scientific Practice

The principles of good scientific practice include, in particular:

(1) Working "de lege artis"[1],

(2) Maintaining strict honesty regarding one's own contributions and those of third parties,

(3) Consistently questioning all results, and

(4) Allowing and promoting critical discourse within the scientific community.

§ 3
Professional Ethics of Scientific Personnel

(1) The teaching of the fundamentals of good scientific practice begins at the earliest possible stage in scientific training (including university teaching and degree and doctoral theses) and careers.

(2) Scientific personnel uphold the fundamental values of scientific work.

(3) All career levels, scientific personnel engage in a continuous process of learning and further training regarding good scientific practice. They exchange ideas and support one another in this regard.

[1] "De lege artis" is a Latin term meaning "according to the rules of the art". It expresses that something is carried out in accordance with established standards, regulations, or practices to ensure integrity and quality.

§ 4
Organisational Responsibility of the Institute's Leadership

(1) The leadership of the NW-FVA is responsible for ensuring and communicating compliance with good scientific practice at the NW-FVA. The leadership of the NW-FVA comprises the director of the NW-FVA and their deputy.

(2) The leadership of the NW-FVA establishes the framework conditions for scientifically compliant work at the NW-FVA by implementing an appropriate institutional organisational structure. In this way, the leadership creates the prerequisites for scientific personnel to be able to comply with legal and ethical standards.

(3) At the NW-FVA, clear procedures and principles for personnel selection and development are established through the following measures and laid down in writing, with particular emphasis on equal opportunities and diversity. These include:

- The NW-FVA's Gender Equality Plan sets out measures to promote gender equality and diversity. This plan is based on the Lower Saxony Equal Rights Act (NGG) as the legal foundation. Notwithstanding this, the Gender Equality Plan applies to all NW-FVA employees, as the institution regards itself as unified in terms of working conditions for its staff, irrespective of its status as a "multi-state institution" and any associated differences in legal regulations for individual matters. Furthermore, creating separate gender equality plans for the employment groups of the respective member states does not appear sensible, as the distribution or allocation of specific posts in the NW-FVA and the associated tasks, rights, and obligations are essentially independent of their anchoring in the staffing plans of the individual member states.

(4) Gender equality is promoted as a guiding principle in all NW-FVA measures. Processes are designed transparently and avoid unconscious biases ("unconscious bias"[2]) as far as possible.

(5) Fixed-term and permanent scientific personnel are treated equally in principle. The NW-FVA strives to design fixed-term employment relationships in a way that positively affects the employability of staff. Personnel selection always follows clear and documented procedures/principles. To ensure continuous personnel development, specific goals and measures to improve the compatibility of work and family life are set out in the NW-FVA's Gender Equality Plan.

(6) The following support structures and concepts are established for early-career researchers:

- The supervision of early-career researchers is conducted in close cooperation with the University of Göttingen (UGOE), the University of Kassel, and the University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HAWK) in Göttingen on a regular basis. Scientific personnel at the NW-FVA are involved in teaching and joint projects at these institutions. They also act as primary or secondary supervisors for theses or doctoral projects. NW-FVA events are listed in the UGOE course catalogue and can thus be used for examination credits. A framework agreement exists with UGOE on a strategic partnership. This includes the implementation of basic research findings into practice, the joint execution of (third-party-funded) projects, and cooperation at the international level (summer schools, workshops).

[2] Unconscious biases refer to prejudices or biases that people hold towards others based on characteristics or traits of which they are often unaware.

Additionally, collaborations and the supervision of early-career researchers with other universities, universities of applied sciences, and institutions are an established part of the NW-FVA's activities.

§ 5
Responsibility of Heads of Work Units

(1) All leadership levels of the NW-FVA, particularly the heads of departments and subject areas, create and maintain the framework conditions for scientific work. The head of a scientific work unit bears the substantive and content-related responsibility for compliance with the provisions of this directive by all persons employed there who are engaged in research or research-supporting activities.

(2) This responsibility includes, in particular, the obligation:

i. To provide individual supervision for early-career researchers, embedded in the overall concept of the NW-FVA,

ii. To promote the careers of scientific and research-supporting[3] personnel, and

iii. To communicate the principles of scientific integrity.[4]

(3) Collaboration within the NW-FVA, particularly within and between departments and subject areas, is organised by the leadership in such a way that the unit as a whole can fulfil its tasks and the necessary cooperation and coordination can take place. To this end, all persons in these units are made aware of their roles, rights, and obligations by their respective superiors.

(4) Abuse of power and exploitation of dependency relationships are counteracted through suitable disciplinary and organisational measures at both the level of individual work units and the level of the NW-FVA leadership. The staff representation, equal opportunity commissioner, and, where applicable, the representative for severely disabled persons play a central role in this, as they are approachable for all and actively offer themselves as points of contact.

(5) Scientific personnel enjoy an appropriate balance of support and personal responsibility commensurate with their career stage.

[3] Research-supporting or research-accessory personnel refers to non-scientific staff such as laboratory technicians. The term is often used in the context of the 2015/16 amended Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz (WissZVG), in which the substantive reason for fixed-term contracts is waived for research-accessory personnel.

[4] Scientific integrity, or academic integrity, means, in short, observing the rules of good scientific practice and avoiding scientific misconduct.

§ 6
Evaluation of Scientific Performance

(1) The evaluation of the performance of scientific personnel in various internal assessment processes, e.g., personnel evaluations for appointments and promotions or in employment references, shall follow a multidimensional approach.

(2) A significant component of the evaluation is scientific performance, which is primarily assessed according to qualitative criteria. In addition, research projects, innovative capacity, societal relevance, advisory services, knowledge transfer through training, supervision of early-career researchers, and application-oriented aspects are to be included.

(3) Beyond scientific performance, other aspects may be considered. These include, in particular, the categories of the General Act on Equal Treatment of the Federal Republic of Germany (AGG).

(4) The evaluation criteria of the respective member states, which apply to NW-FVA employees according to their state affiliation, remain unaffected. Quantitative indicators can be incorporated into the overall evaluation in a differentiated and reflective manner.

Section II
Rules in the Research Process

§ 7
Cross-Phase Quality Assurance

(1) Scientific personnel carry out each step of the research process "de lege artis". Continuous and cross-phase quality assurance takes place.

(2) The origin of data, organisms, materials, and software used in the research process is made identifiable by citing the original sources and the conditions which apply to their reuse are to be documented. If publicly accessible software is used, it must be persistently documented in a citeable way, including the source code, insofar as this is possible and reasonable.

(3) The type and scope of research data[5] arising in the research process must be described in detail. This description follows the NW-FVA schema for describing datasets and is stored together with the research data according to the current data management plan.

(4) An essential part of quality assurance is enabling other scientific personnel to replicate results or retrace findings.

(5) When scientific findings are made publicly accessible (including through channels other than publications), the applied quality assurance mechanisms are always to be presented. If inconsistencies or errors in such findings are subsequently noticed or pointed out, they must be corrected.

§ 8
Involved Actors, Responsibilities, Roles

(1) The roles and responsibilities of scientific personnel involved in a research project must be clearly defined and unambiguous at all times.

(2) If necessary, the roles and responsibilities are adjusted.

[5] Research data are data generated in the course of scientific projects, e.g., through digitisation, source research, experiments, measurements, surveys, breeding, software development, or interviews.

§ 9
Research Design

(1) Scientific personnel comprehensively consider and acknowledge the current state of research when planning a project. This usually requires careful research into already publicly accessible research output.

(2) The leadership of the NW-FVA ensures, within its budgetary means, the necessary framework conditions for this research.

(3) Scientific personnel apply methods to avoid (even unconscious) biases in the interpretation of findings, insofar as this is possible and reasonable.

(4) Scientific personnel examine whether and to what extent gender and diversity may be relevant to the research project and adapt their concepts accordingly.

§ 10
Legal and Ethical Framework Conditions of Research

(1) Scientific personnel at the NW-FVA handle the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of research responsibly.

(2) The leadership of the NW-FVA is responsible for ensuring that its scientific personnel act in compliance with regulations and promotes this through suitable organisational structures. It develops binding principles for research ethics and procedures for the corresponding assessment of research projects.

(3) Scientific personnel at the NW-FVA observe rights and obligations, particularly those resulting from legal requirements but also from contracts with third parties. They obtain, if necessary, permissions and ethics approvals and present these.

- Regarding research projects, a thorough assessment of the consequences of the research and the evaluation of the respective ethical aspects should be carried out. The legal framework conditions of a research project also include documented agreements on the usage rights to the research data and results arising from it. It is necessary for the scientific personnel of the NW-FVA to continuously be aware of the danger of misuse of research results. Their responsibility is not limited solely to compliance with legal requirements but also includes the obligation to use their knowledge, experience, and skills in such a way that risks can be identified, assessed, and evaluated. In doing so, they particularly consider the aspects associated with security-relevant research ("dual use").

§ 11
Usage Rights

(1) The use of research data is primarily granted to those scientific personnel who were involved in data collection. This includes, among others, the applicants, the project leaders, and the scientific personnel who collected the data on-site or were responsible for the collection of data by third parties. For contract research, it must be agreed before commissioning who ultimately owns the data.

(2) Scientific personnel make documented written agreements on the usage rights to the data and results arising from the research project with all persons involved in data collection at the earliest possible time.

- This applies in particular when multiple institutions are involved in a research project or when it is foreseeable that scientific personnel will leave the NW-FVA and wish to continue using the data they generated for (their own) research purposes.
- In the case of collaborative projects, it must be specified at the time of project application or, at the latest, in a collaboration agreement who is permitted to use the data and how it is to be published or cited.

(3) Scientific personnel who are no longer employed at the NW-FVA should, within the framework of legal and practical possibilities, be granted access to research data and materials they helped produce for research and documentation purposes, insofar as the NW-FVA holds these.

(4) The authorised users establish rules on whether and how third parties may access the research data.

§ 12
Methods and Standards

(1) Scientifically sound and traceable methods are applied in research.

(2) In the development and application of new methods, scientific personnel place particular emphasis on quality assurance and the establishment of standards.

§ 13
Documentation

(1) Scientific personnel document all information relevant to the production of a research result in a traceable manner, as required and appropriate in the respective field, in order to enable verification and evaluation, as well as replication of results. If specific disciplinary recommendations exist for verification and evaluation, scientific personnel perform the documentation according to the respective requirements. In the development of research software, its source code is documented, insofar as this is possible and reasonable.

(2) Individual results that do not support one's own hypothesis are also documented in principle. Selection of results is inadmissible.

(3) If the documentation does not meet the requirements according to paragraphs 1 and 2, the limitations and reasons for this are presented in a traceable manner.

(4) Documentation and research results must not be manipulated. They must be protected against manipulation to the greatest extent possible. For this purpose, concrete technical and organisational measures are developed in the respective research data management plans. These include, among others, versioning, redundant storage, transparent processes for data backup, and external backups on public servers, insofar as this is legally possible.

§ 14
Providing Public Access to Research Results

(1) In principle, scientific personnel bring all their results into the scientific discourse.

(2) Scientific personnel are encouraged to observe the principle of originality and quality over quantity. They are urged to avoid excessively fragmented publications of partial results on a research topic. Repeated publication of the same results must contain an explicit reference to the first publication. This also applies to translations of scientific publications.

(3) In individual cases, there may be reasons not to make results publicly accessible. The decision on accessibility must not depend on third parties; rather, scientific personnel decide in principle on their own responsibility and in consideration of the conventions of the respective field whether, how, and where they make their results publicly accessible. Exceptions are permissible particularly where third-party rights (e.g., General Data Protection Regulation) are affected, patent applications are pending, or the research is contract-based or security-relevant.

(4) If results are made publicly accessible, they must be described completely and traceably (metadata[6]). The requirements of international standards and the schemata developed at the NW-FVA must be observed. This also includes making the underlying research data, materials, and information, the methods applied, and the software used available, insofar as possible and reasonable. This is done according to the FAIR principles: Findable, Accessible, Interoperable[7], Re-Usable. Exceptions are permissible in the context of patent applications and private-sector data.

(5) Self-programmed software is made accessible with its source code, insofar as this is possible and reasonable. If applicable, licensing is carried out. Workflows are comprehensively presented.

(6) One's own and others' preliminary work are fully and correctly cited, unless discipline-specific exceptions allow for omission in the case of one's own already publicly accessible results. At the same time, the repetition of the contents of one's own publications is limited to what is necessary for understanding.

[6] Metadata are structured data that contain information about characteristics of other data. Thus, information about properties of an individual object (e.g., "person's name") is also referred to as its metadata.

[7] Interoperability is the ability of independent, heterogeneous systems to interact seamlessly in order to exchange data in an efficient and usable manner or to make it available to the user without the need for special adaptations.

§ 15
Authorship

(1) An author is someone who has made a genuine, traceable contribution to the content of a scientific text, data, or software publication. Whether a genuine and traceable contribution exists depends on the discipline-specific principles of scientific work and must be judged by the authors in individual cases.

(2) A genuine, traceable contribution exists in particular when a scientifically active person has contributed in a scientifically significant manner to:

- The design and development of the specific research activities described and evaluated in the publication (not: mere application for or acquisition of funds for overarching framework projects, institutional units, or equipment, mere leadership or superior position in the respective research institution, etc.);
- Independent acquisition and preparation of data, exploration of sources, or programming of software (not: mere execution of technical routine tasks, mere implementation of predefined survey formats, etc.);
- Independent analysis, evaluation, or interpretation of data, sources, or results (not: mere listing of data, mere compilation of sources, etc.);
- Development of conceptual approaches or argumentative structures (not: mere consultation on others' drafts, mere input of unspecific suggestions, etc.);
- Drafting of the manuscript (not: mere editorial adjustments, mere linguistic corrections, etc.).

(3) If a contribution is insufficient to justify authorship, the support can be appropriately acknowledged in footnotes, prefaces, or acknowledgements. Honorary authorship, where no sufficient contribution has been made, is as inadmissible as deriving authorship solely from a leadership or superior function (see the first point of the enumeration under paragraph 2).

(4) All authors must agree to the final version of the work to be published; they share joint responsibility for the publication, unless explicitly indicated otherwise. Without sufficient reason, consent to a publication must not be refused. Refusal must rather be justified with verifiable criticism of data, methods, or results.

Scientific personnel agree in a timely manner – usually no later than when drafting the manuscript – on who will be an author of the research results. The agreement must be based on traceable criteria and in consideration of the conventions of each field.

§ 16
Publication Outlets

(1) The scientific quality of a contribution does not depend on the publication outlet in which it is made publicly accessible. In addition to publications in books and journals, subject, data, and software repositories as well as, for example, websites and blogs are also suitable.

(2) Authors carefully select the publication outlet in consideration of its quality and visibility in the respective discourse field and with regard to the target audience. A new publication outlet is checked for its seriousness.

(3) Those who assume editorship carefully examine for which publication outlets this is done. Acceptance of an editorship must be coordinated with superiors.

§ 17
Confidentiality and Neutrality in Reviews and Consultations

(1) Honest conduct is the basis of the legitimacy of an evaluation process.

(2) Scientific personnel who evaluate manuscripts, funding applications, or the qualifications of persons are obliged to maintain strict confidentiality in this regard. They disclose all facts and circumstances that could give rise to concerns about bias without delay to the responsible office.

(3) Confidentiality includes not passing on content accessed in the course of their function to third parties and not using it for their own purposes.

(4) Paragraphs 1 and 2 apply accordingly to members of scientific advisory and decision-making bodies.

§ 18
Archiving

(1) Scientific personnel keep research data or results that are or have been made publicly accessible, as well as the underlying central materials, accessible and traceable in an appropriate manner. For this purpose, project-related data must be stored on the provided project drives at the NW-FVA. Research data used in publications must be deposited in public repositories, insofar as this is required by the journal (e.g., Zenodo). If this is not possible for legal reasons, they must be stored together with the publication on the project drive under the path "Permanent" and thus included in the archiving. The standards of the respective field are decisive. As a rule, the research data to be archived are stored as raw data.

(2) The retention according to paragraph 1 is for an appropriate period, usually 10 years. Here too, the standards of the respective field are decisive. The retention period begins with the provision of public access to the respective data or results.

(3) Paragraphs 1 and 2 also apply to research software used.

(4) If legitimate reasons exist for not retaining certain data or retaining them for a shorter period than specified in paragraph 2, scientific personnel present these reasons in a traceable manner.

(5) The leadership of the NW-FVA ensures that the infrastructure required for appropriate archiving is available. It also ensures that the data remain archived and can be made available to the public for the aforementioned period even after the scientific personnel have left.

Section III
Ombuds System

§ 19
Ombudspersons

(1) At the NW-FVA, an ombudsperson and a deputy ombudsperson are appointed. The deputy is provided for cases where there are concerns about the impartiality of the ombudsperson or if the ombudsperson is unable to perform their function. Whether there are concerns about impartiality is assessed according to § 21 of the Administrative Procedure Act (VwVfG). In case of doubt, the Investigation Commission under Section IV decides.

(2) Reputable scientific personnel at the NW-FVA, who already have experience in leading and conducting research projects, can be appointed as ombudsperson or deputy. The disciplines represented at the NW-FVA should also be considered in the appointment.

(3) The ombudsperson and their deputy may not be members of a leadership body and may not serve as members of an investigation commission during their term of office. Leadership bodies include:

   a) the institute's leadership and their deputy,

   b) the department heads, and

   c) the subject area heads.

(4) The appointment of the ombudspersons is made by the leadership of the NW-FVA. The staff council of the NW-FVA must be given the opportunity to submit a corresponding list of suggestions. The ombudsperson and their deputy should ideally not come from the same department, but under no circumstances should they come from the same subject area. area.

(5) The term of office of an ombudsperson or deputy ombudsperson lasts four years. A second term is possible.

(6) The ombudsperson and their deputy receive the necessary substantive support and acceptance from the leadership of the NW-FVA in performing their tasks. To enhance the functionality of the ombuds system, measures should be taken to ease the burden in other areas on the incumbent ombudsperson and the deputy.

§ 20
Ombuds Activities

(1) The ombudsperson and their deputy under § 19 perform their ombuds activities independently, particularly independent of instructions or informal case-specific influences by the institute's leadership or other leading persons. The ombuds activities are conducted confidentially, i.e., maintaining secrecy.

(2) All members and affiliates of the NW-FVA can contact the ombudsperson with questions about good scientific practice and also regarding suspected scientific misconduct. Alternatively, members and affiliates of the NW-FVA have the option to contact the nationally active "Ombuds Committee for Scientific Integrity in Germany" (https://ombudsman-fuer-die-wissenschaft.de/).

(3) The leadership of the NW-FVA ensures that the local ombudsperson and their deputy are known at the NW-FVA. The identity and contact details of the respective incumbents are communicated via the following channels: entry on the NW-FVA website, internal information sheet upon appointment, filing on an internal information platform, public notice within the NW-FVA, and annual announcement at the staff meeting.

(4) Ombudspersons advise as neutral and qualified contacts on questions of good scientific practice and in cases of suspected scientific misconduct. They contribute, as far as possible, to solution-oriented conflict mediation.

(5) The ombudsperson or their deputy receive inquiries confidentially and forward cases of suspected scientific misconduct to the NW-FVA's Investigation Commission under "Section IV – Procedures for Dealing with Scientific Misconduct" if necessary.

Section IV
Procedures for Dealing with Scientific Misconduct

§ 21
General Principles for Handling Suspected Cases of Scientific Misconduct

(1) All offices at the NW-FVA responsible for reviewing suspicions of scientific misconduct shall, within their remit, take appropriate measures to protect both the whistleblower and the accused. These offices shall be mindful that conducting proceedings and imposing sanctions may significantly impact the legal rights of the accused.

(2) Investigations into allegations of scientific misconduct shall, at all times, adhere to the rule of law, fairness, and the presumption of innocence. Proceedings shall remain confidential. Inquiries shall be conducted impartially, and decisions shall be made without regard to personal status.

(3) Whistleblowers must act in good faith when reporting suspicions. They must possess objective grounds indicating potential violations of good scientific practice. If the whistleblower cannot personally verify the facts underlying the suspicion or is uncertain about interpreting the Guidelines for Good Scientific Practice (Section I), they should consult the NW-FVA's ombudsperson or deputy for clarification.

(4) Neither the whistleblower nor the accused shall suffer professional or academic disadvantages due to the report, provided that the accused's misconduct has not been proven. For early-career researchers, reporting should not unduly delay qualifications (e.g., thesis submissions or promotions) or affect employment conditions, including contract extensions.

(5) Whistleblowers shall remain protected even if misconduct is unproven, unless the allegation was made in bad faith.

(6) All offices involved shall prioritise timely proceedings and ensure each phase is concluded within a reasonable period.

(7) Anonymous reports shall be reviewed if they provide verifiable, sufficiently detailed facts enabling feasible scrutiny.

(8) If the whistleblower's identity is known to the responsible office, it shall be treated confidentially and disclosed to third parties only with the whistleblower's consent (preferably in writing). Exceptions apply where:

- Legal obligations require disclosure;
- The accused's defence necessitates identifying the whistleblower (who shall be notified beforehand and may withdraw the report).

Withdrawal does not preclude continuing investigations if justified by scientific integrity or the NW-FVA's legitimate interests.

(9) If the whistleblower publicly discloses the allegation, the investigating office decides, at its discretion, how to deal with this breach of confidentiality.

§ 22
Acts of Scientific Misconduct

(1) Scientific misconduct occurs when an NW-FVA researcher, in a research-related context, intentionally or grossly negligently:

- Makes false claims;
- Misappropriates others' scholarly work; or
- Undermines others' research.

Severity is classified as *minor*, *moderate*, *serious*, or *grave*, based on:

- Culpability (intent/gross negligence);
- Method of commission; and
- Consequences for affected parties/institutions.

Paragraphs 5 to 8 define additional specific offences.

(2) **False claims** include:

a) Fabricating research results;

b) Falsifying data/results (e.g., suppressing/deleting data without disclosure, misrepresenting visuals);

c) Misrepresenting images or their captions;

d) False statements in funding applications/reports;

e) Claiming authorship without consent.

(3) **Misappropriation** includes:

a) Plagiarism (unattributed use of others' content[8]);

b) Unauthorised use of research approaches, results, or ideas ("theft of intellectual property");

c) Unauthorised sharing of data/theories/findings;

d) Undue claims of authorship;

e) Distorting scientific content;

f) Unauthorised pre-publication dissemination.

(4) **Undermining research** includes:

a) Sabotage (e.g., damaging/destroying/manipulating experiments, equipment, records, hardware, software etc.);

b) Falsifying/unauthorised destruction of data, documents and documentations.

(5) **Scientific misconduct can also include**:

a) Co-authorship of publications containing false claims or misappropriated work;

b) Negligent supervision enabling or facilitating the misconduct of others.

(6) **Aiding/abetting** intentional misconduct under this directive is itself misconduct.

[8] This also includes concealing the use of generative models such as ChatGPT or DeepSeek.

(7) **Breaches by reviewers/committee members**:

a) Unauthorised use of confidential data, theories or knowledge obtained through official duties;

b) Unauthorised disclosure of such data, theories or knowledge;

c) Failure to disclose conflicts of interest.

(8) **Deliberate concealment** of others' misconduct for personal/third-party gain by reviewers/committee members.

§ 23
Initiating an Investigation

(1) Whistleblowers shall submit suspicions to the ombudsperson (§ 19) with specific, verifiable allegations (preferably in writing; oral reports require written minutes).

(2) Reports should include:

- Accused's name and affiliation;
- Whistleblower's name (optional);
- Witnesses (if applicable);
- Detailed description of alleged misconduct (time, location, method);
- Supporting evidence (e.g., documents, data);
- Relevant funding sources or projects.

(3) Where impartiality is in doubt, whistleblowers may contact the national *Ombuds Committee for Scientific Integrity* (parallel submissions to multiple institutions are prohibited).

(4) The ombudsperson shall confidentially assess whether verifiable grounds exist. Mediation may be attempted if the alleged misconduct is rectifiable and confidentiality remains intact.

(5) If mediation fails or suspicions persist, the case shall be referred to the Investigation Commission (§ 24).

(6) The ombudsperson's role terminates if the whistleblower withdraws consent, except in cases of grave misconduct.

§ 24
Investigation Commission

(1) An *ad hoc* commission of five members (plus chair) shall be appointed by the NW-FVA leadership, with substitutes for each member. The chair shall be a department head; a deputy chair shall be elected internally. Members shall be NW-FVA researchers, reflecting disciplinary diversity.

(2) External experts or legal advisors may be consulted as non-voting members.

(3) Substitutes shall step in cases of conflict of interest or absence (assessed per § 22 StPO). Challenges to impartiality shall be decided by the commission (excluding the challenged member).

(4) Decisions require a simple majority (the chair's vote shall break ties). A quorum of four members is required.

(5) Members shall act independently and maintain strict confidentiality.

(6) Proceedings shall be confidential and closed to the public.

(7) Current membership shall be disclosed by the ombudsperson upon request.

§ 25
Preliminary Review

(1) The commission shall evaluate the ombudsperson's referral, including plausibility checks where not already conducted.

(2) If no *prima facie* case exists, proceedings shall be dismissed (with written notice to all parties).

(3) If initial suspicion is confirmed, a commission member shall investigate further and may attempt mediation.

(4) The accused shall be informed of allegations and evidence, and given at least 2 weeks to respond. Whistleblowers and experts may submit supplementary statements.

(5) Following review, the commission may:

a) Dismiss the case (unsubstantiated allegations);

b) Settle via mutual agreement (with corrective measures);

c) Dismiss with minor misconduct (conditional on remedial actions);

d) Escalate to formal investigation (§ 26) for grave misconduct.

(6) Decisions must specify the type and severity of any misconduct.

§ 26
Formal Investigation Procedure

(1) The commission shall schedule prompt hearings. The accused may respond orally or in writing (non-cooperation shall not be penalised). The whistleblower shall be reconsulted.

(2) The commission may:

- Request documents or evidence;
- Seek expert opinions;
- Interview witnesses (respecting legal privileges).

(3) Case records must document all investigative steps.

(4) Interviewees may bring a trusted advisor (with prior notification).

(5) Verdicts require majority consensus. Deliberations shall be confidential. Cases may be dismissed for insufficient evidence or triviality (no appeals permitted).

(6) Whistleblower anonymity shall be handled per § 21(8–9).

(7) Parallel disciplinary or legal proceedings shall suspend investigations.

(8) The commission shall submit a final report (including sanctions recommendations) to the NW-FVA leadership.

(9) Case files shall be archived for 10 years.

§ 27
Concluding the Procedure

(1) The NW-FVA leadership shall decide on misconduct findings and sanctions.

(2) If the accused is a leadership member, the commission's verdict stands unless misconduct is found (in which case the matter is referred to the overseeing ministry).

(3) All parties shall receive written outcomes. Legal appeals are permitted.

(4) Relevant institutions or third parties with legitimate interests may be notified (at leadership's discretion). Public disclosure may occur to uphold scientific integrity.

(5) Academic degree revocation requires involvement of the awarding university.

§ 28
Potential Sanctions and Measures

(1) Where misconduct is proven, the NW-FVA leadership may impose:

i. **Disciplinary measures** (per member-state civil service laws);

ii. **Employment consequences**:

a) Formal reprimand;

b) Summary dismissal;

c) Ordinary termination;

d) Contract dissolution.

iii. **Academic consequences**:

a) Retraction/correction of publications;

b) Degree revocation (via awarding university);

c) Teaching ban revocation.

iv. **Civil/administrative measures**:

a) Site access bans;

b) Restitution claims;

c) Injunctions;

d) Damages/funding recovery.

v. **Criminal referrals** (e.g., fraud, data tampering).

vi. **Public notifications** (for grave misconduct).

(2) Sanctions not explicitly mentioned in the outcome letter remain enforceable.

§ 29
Transitional Provisions / Application After Leaving NW-FVA

(1) § 22 applies only to acts committed after this directive's enactment.

(2) These procedures apply solely to reports submitted post-enactment. Ongoing cases follow prior rules.

(3) Proceedings may target former NW-FVA personnel for acts during their tenure.

Section V
Entry into Force of this Directive

§ 30
Entry into Force

(1) This directive enters into force upon signature on 01.06.2025. It supersedes the NW-FVA's 2007 Declaration on Good Scientific Practice (updated 03.07.2013).

Göttingen, 06.05.2025

Dr. Ralf-Volker Nagel
Director of the NW-FVA