

DEMOCRACY UNDER PRESSURE: HOW DOES THAT IMPACT TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

HANDOUT FOR UNIVERSITY LECTURERS

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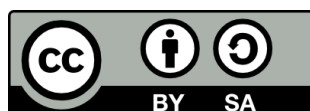
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1. INTRODUCTION

Democracy is under pressure: polarization, targeted disinformation and a heated debate culture define our society today – including open hostility towards the liberal-democratic social order. This trend does not stop at the doors of universities. Ruhr University Bochum has therefore drawn up an action plan to strengthen democracy and diversity. This handout sets out the details of this action plan for faculty members, i.e. lecturers, in order to help them handle politically sensitive situations in the classroom and to foster democratic competence through teaching.

Are universities politically neutral spaces? To what extent is it possible – or even necessary – for lecturers to express their personal views in the classroom? How can we fulfil our duty of care and protection towards students and staff without closing off spaces for discourse? And how can university teaching help to strengthen students' democratic competence? This handout addresses these questions and many more.

Universities are a place for free, evidence-based debate and respectful collaboration. Still, lecturers find themselves caught between freedom of expression and the legal boundaries of discrimination, between threats and incitement to hatred, and between open-minded didactics and the responsibility to create safe and inclusive learning environments. University lecturers bear a great deal of responsibility for their students and, at the same time, often find themselves feeling unsettled by recent societal shifts. In light of these challenges, we are leveraging our expertise in anti-discrimination work and science education to provide lecturers with guidance and support.

2. FRAMEWORK CONDITIONS: UNIVERSITIES IN A DEMOCRACY

2.1 SOCIETAL SHIFTS AS FRAMEWORKS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Germany ranks high in global democracy indices – as a ‘free country’ in the Freedom House index and as a full democracy in the prestigious ‘Economist’ index. In the ‘Reporters Without Borders’ Press Freedom Index, Germany ranked 12th worldwide in 2025. Democracy as a form of government also enjoys widespread acceptance amongst the population.

Even so, a growing sense of unease is evident. The shift towards authoritarianism in the US, the electoral successes of extremist parties in Germany, wars, increasing distrust of the media and, not least, economic uncertainty are factors contributing to a complex situation that is giving rise to doubts about the stability of democracy in Germany. The result is growing dissatisfaction with the functioning of democracy and a decline in trust in parliamentary democracy.

As a system founded on rationality and operating through international networks, academia has long been regarded as an environment in which democratic values enjoy a high level of acceptance. And yet, universities are not immune to wider societal shifts. For instance, at Ruhr University Bochum, several academics were publicly vilified for their research in 2025, and posts dedicated to anti-discrimination, equality and queer feminism were threatened by far-right extremists. The threat does not come solely from outside: in isolated cases, students and lecturers have caused concern due to unscientific and extremist views.

In light of the above, what can universities do? How can they take a stand?

2.2 HIGHER-EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS AND THE LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC CONSTITUTION

The freedom of science, research and teaching is enshrined in Article 5(3) of the Basic Law. Research and teaching are thereby protected from state interference, censorship and external influence. The freedom of science, research and teaching goes hand in hand with loyalty to the Constitution and the rule of law, which is reflected at various levels of legislation. The Higher Education Framework Act states as follows:

- “Higher education institutions serve to foster and develop the sciences and the arts through research, teaching, study and continuing education [within a free, democratic and social state governed by the rule of law.](#)” (Section 2 of the Higher Education Framework Act, Functions of Higher Education Institutions)

At State level, the Higher Education Act of North Rhine-Westphalia states:

- “Freedom of research, teaching, artistic expression and study **does not exempt individuals from their duty of loyalty to the Constitution.**” (Section 4 of the Higher Education Act of North Rhine-Westphalia, Freedom in Science, Teaching and Study)

In accordance with its academic autonomy, Ruhr University Bochum has enshrined the following in its constitution:

- “Research at Ruhr University Bochum aims to advance knowledge. **In pursuing this aim, the members of Ruhr University Bochum are guided by the fundamental values enshrined in the Basic Law, the European Charter of Fundamental Rights and the Charter of the United Nations.**” (Art. 2(2), sentences 3–5 of the Constitution of Ruhr University Bochum, Mission and Tasks)

The higher education and academic system is therefore bound by the free and democratic constitutional order. These principles extend to members of staff, who are likewise required to respect the legal and constitutional order.

2.3 DUTY TO UPHOLD THE CONSTITUTION AND DUTY TO MAINTAIN PARTY-POLITICAL NEUTRALITY

As public-sector employees, university faculty members are obligated, first, to uphold the Constitution and, second, to remain non-partisan and politically neutral.

- **Loyalty to the Constitution:** All university employees are fundamentally bound by a duty of loyalty to the Constitution. For salaried employees, this is governed by the Collective Bargaining Agreement of the States (TV-L); for civil servants, it is governed, in part, by the Civil Service Status Act. The TV-L states: “Employees must, through their entire conduct, profess their commitment to the free democratic basic order as defined by the Basic Law” (Section 3(1), sentence 1, TV-L). The Civil Service Status Act includes the following addition to the same wording: “...and advocate for its preservation” (Section 33(1), Civil Service Status Act). University employees are therefore not politically neutral but must advocate for the democratic values and principles of the Basic Law – such as human dignity, freedom, equality, and democracy. Support for a fascist regime or a regime based on Sharia law would be incompatible with the principles of the Constitution.
- **Political neutrality/non-partisanship:** As public employees, university staff are required to maintain political neutrality, since, as public servants, they serve the people and not a specific

political party. They must perform their duties with impartiality (Section 33 of the Civil Service Status Act; the same applies to employees covered by collective bargaining agreements). Political neutrality/non-partisanship would no longer be upheld if faculty members favored or discriminated against members of certain parties, or if they promoted a specific party or engaged in biased campaigning against a specific, non-prohibited party. However, membership in a democratic party is not an issue and may be freely disclosed. Political neutrality does not, therefore, mean refraining from a critical examination of party-political positions, provided that such an examination is objective and not one-sided.

2.4 ALLEGIANCE TO THE CONSTITUTION AND PARTY-POLITICAL NEUTRALITY IN CONFLICT

The duty to uphold the Constitution and the duty to remain politically neutral are, in principle, mutually compatible. However, difficulties arise when a political party itself no longer acts in accordance with the Constitution. In such cases, employees must decide whether to advocate for the Constitution (and criticize the party) or to remain politically neutral (and refrain from commenting on positions that are unconstitutional).

This dilemma cannot always be resolved. Nevertheless, there are ways to reconcile the two positions:

- Lecturers can state facts at any time, for example: “The Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution has classified the party as definitively right-wing or left-wing extremist.”
- Rather than distancing themselves from political parties across the board, teachers can specifically address critical positions: “I do not believe this statement by Party XY is compatible with the values of our Constitution, and I therefore expressly reject it.”
- Statements such as “Please vote!” are of course fully acceptable.

2.5 DUTY OF CARE

The duty of care that members of the teaching staff owe their students is based on the students’ fundamental rights, which public authorities – including lecturers, teachers and educators – are duty-bound to protect. This duty encompasses the protection of students’ physical and mental health, the safeguarding of their personality rights, and the promotion of a learning environment that is as free from discrimination and as safe as possible. In academic and political debates, it is important to be able to engage in controversial discussions. However, a disagreement should not degenerate into

discrimination. If lecturers observe discrimination in the classroom, they are required to intervene in accordance with their duty of care, especially when such discrimination constitutes a criminal offense against personal dignity and is accompanied by derogatory remarks, insults, slander, or defamation.

3. ADDRESSING DISCRIMINATORY, RADICAL AND EXTREMIST STATEMENTS

In the classroom, lecturers may be confronted with statements that do not align with their own values or those of other students. If such statements are derogatory, lecturers should react appropriately. The starting point for any intervention in higher education is raised awareness. It is only possible to respond appropriately once problematic attitudes and actions are recognized as such. If othering statements – such as ‘we’ versus ‘the others’ – are permitted to go unnoticed and are not addressed resp. put into perspective, no meaningful discussion is possible. It is therefore crucial that lecturers have the necessary awareness to address such statements effectively in the classroom.

3.1 QUALIFYING THE STATEMENTS

Statements made in the classroom require different strategies for an appropriate response. Broadly speaking, there are three types of statements to which teachers should be able to respond effectively.

Microaggressions:

Microaggressions are subtle, derogatory comments or gestures, as well as jokes and – in some cases – unconscious biases toward people based on characteristics or attributes such as origin, skin color, gender, or disability. Members of these groups are ‘othered’ and denigrated.

Generally speaking, such comments are not intended to be discriminatory, derogatory, or marginalizing. Rather, they stem from carelessness or reflect an unexamined mindset. They are usually not entrenched and can therefore be challenged. They present an opportunity for constructive dialogue and informed debate. The students in questions usually demonstrate an inquisitive and reflective mindset.

Politically radical statements:

Radical political movements call for radical changes to the political, social, or economic system. They seek to fundamentally reform or replace existing structures. They can be left-wing, right-wing, or religiously motivated.

Students with radical beliefs often attempt to frame their views as absolute truth and convince others of their validity. They raise their voice, engage in confrontational discussions, and frequently use combative terms that suggest entrenched attitudes. These terms are strategically reinterpreted or re-defined to advance a specific agenda. Examples include the positive connotation given to the German

term ‘völkisch’ or the racist-völkisch reinterpretation of ‘remigration’, as well as terms such as ‘great replacement’ or ‘suppression of the freedom of speech’. Another aspect is the tendency to position themselves as victims (e.g. people whose ‘freedom of speech is suppressed’), even though these individuals themselves marginalize others. This strategy can severely polarize discussions and make it difficult to present objective arguments. Discriminatory intentions can emerge clearly. These students are often not surprised when the impact of their statements is pointed out to them.

Statements with extremist organization origins:

Extremist political movements go even further than radical views and completely reject the existing system. They seek to overthrow the current system and advocate for drastic measures to achieve their goals. These views are often associated with intolerance and the rejection of democratic principles and human rights.

We see here a largely cohesive and well-established worldview. Students can be trained members of organized groups – the New Right, in particular, seeks to build an intellectual elite through leadership training programs. At universities, they typically adopt camouflage strategies to avoid being identified as extremists, so their views are often not apparent at first glance.

While unintentional microaggressions are quite commonplace among students – due to the fact that discriminatory attitudes are widespread in many social groups or are espoused by them (see Decker et al. 2022 & Zick et al. 2025) – students who are members of extremist organizations have so far been rather rare.

QUALIFYING THE STATEMENTS

Microaggressions	Politically radical statements	Statements with extremist organization origins
▪ Frequently unintended ▪ Carelessness, mental search processes or attitudes ▪ Can be challenged and interrogated	▪ Deeply held convictions that are difficult to challenge ▪ An attempt to legitimize and conviction of ‘true knowledge’ ▪ Must be addressed in the long term	▪ A largely entrenched extremist worldview ▪ Camouflage strategy ▪ Frequently trained individuals with firm convictions ▪ Occur rarely
→ Offenheit und fragende Haltung erkennbar	→ Discriminatory and confrontational intentions evident	→ Political alignment not apparent at first glance

Fig. 1: Qualifying the statements

For individuals who have experienced discrimination – including racism, sexism, ableism, queer-phobia and any other form of marginalization – it is usually of secondary importance whether discriminatory remarks made in everyday situations by members of the teaching staff or by fellow students have been intentional or not. They experience feelings of hurt and stress regardless ('minority stress'). Furthermore, discrimination undermines self-confidence and has a negative impact on general well-being and academic performance (see the study on experiences of discrimination at Ruhr University Bochum. While university faculty members cannot prevent every instance of behavior that causes stress, they are obligated to work toward fostering a culture of respectful communication.

3.2 DISTINCTION: FREEDOM OF SPEECH VS. CRIMINAL OFFENSES

In higher education, the question of where an individual's fundamental freedom of speech ends can often be a source of uncertainty. Freedom of speech is restricted under criminal law when its exercise infringes on the rights of others or endangers public peace.

Discriminatory statements and extremist positions in the classroom touch on the tension between freedom of speech and protection against discrimination. Central to teaching is every individual's right to be treated with respect and not to be discriminated against. Insult (§ 185 of the Criminal Code (StGB)) and incitement (§ 130 StGB) are criminal offenses.

LIMITATIONS OF THE FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Freedom of speech is a fundamental right (Article 5 of the German Basic Law), but it ceases to apply when statements infringe on the rights of others or endanger public peace. Criminal offenses include:

Insult (§185 of the German Criminal Code)

- derogatory statements about an identifiable person (an individual or a specific group)
- public proclamation (directed at others, not a private conversation)
- collective designation: specific persons are discriminated against due to physical characteristics
- mere rejection does not constitute an insult; an insult requires that inferiority is implied

Criminal offense: e.g. making monkey noises at a Black classmate in a seminar

Incitement of the masses (§130 of the German Criminal Code)

- targeting a broader public (e.g. via lecture, e-mail, social media)
- call for hatred, violence or defamation against a group (e.g. due to their religion, ethnicity or nationality)
- denial or trivialization of the Holocaust or Nazi crimes

Criminal offense: e.g. a billboard with the slogan 'Excessive immigration is a crusade against the people' → incitement to hatred or violence against a specific group

Fig. 2: Limitations of freedom of speech

Please note: Not every controversial opinion is necessarily discriminatory. University lecturers are in fact required to facilitate controversial discourse. The goal should always be to foster students' analytical skills, and there might be instances where freedom of speech requires us to walk the tight rope. Still, when faced with obviously discriminatory statements, lecturers are always obliged to intervene and fulfill their duty of care.

It's important to note that universities are not responsible for enforcing criminal penalties for unlawful expressions of opinion. In the event of an insult directed at individuals in the classroom, the only option is to remove the perpetrator from the setting (see Chapter 3.5: House Rules). For offenses involving insults, the offended party must file a criminal complaint before criminal charges can be brought.

3.3 CASE STUDIES FROM THE CLASSROOM AND RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

The following section will illustrate the points made above with specific case studies and suggest possible strategies for teachers. Please note that the list of recommended actions is not exhaustive and can be expanded.

Case study 1:

In a philosophy seminar on the topic of hate, the participants discuss terms used by individuals to refer to oneself and to others. A student explains that she does not think it is right that certain words are no longer allowed to be used by mainstream society, while, for example, Black people continue to use the N-word. For her, it generally makes no difference what skin color a person has, which is why she sees no problem with using the word. Another student interjects and says, "The N-word isn't punishable by law. If using it were truly racist, wouldn't using it be a criminal offense?" Some students react with unease.

Strategies that lecturers can deploy in this situation:

Clarify the facts and put them in context

- **Explaining the historical and social context:** In your capacity as an educator, you could explain why certain terms – such as the N-word – carry historical baggage and what hurtful and harmful effects their use can have on individuals targeted by them. You should explain the differences between self-identification and labels imposed by others and their functions, as well as distinguish between certain phenomena and concepts such as racism, criminal liability, hate, etc.

- **Legal and ethical aspects:** You can point out that, while the use of a particular term is not a criminal offense, it may nonetheless be ethically problematic. Within the framework of the seminar, the discussion can serve as an opportunity to address the differences between legal and moral norms. At the same time, there may be contexts in which the use of a term, whether spoken or written, aligns with disciplinary logic – for example, when a word is assessed as an insult in legal terms. In such contexts, it is essential to contextualize the teaching process appropriately.

Facilitate a culture that encourages critical debate while respecting boundaries

- **Moderating the discussion:** As an educator, it is your responsibility to moderate the discussion and address the underlying questions behind the statements. Make sure that all voices are heard, while at the same time setting clear boundaries in accordance with your duty of care. The situation described can be very uncomfortable for individuals affected by the statements, even if this is not apparent at first glance. A response is necessary even if you assume that no one present is personally affected by discrimination. Furthermore, not every form of distress is visible. Therefore, always assume that affected students might be present.
- **Empathy and assuming a different point of view:** Encourage your students to put themselves in the shoes of individuals affected by discrimination and to consider the impact of their words.

Set boundaries and establish clear rules

Establishing guidelines: It is advisable to establish clear rules – ideally involving the seminar participants in the process – for treating one another with respect right at the start of the seminar and to reiterate these rules as needed. For the purpose of this case study, it’s advisable to clarify in advance how to handle offensive language, e.g. using terms like ‘the N-word’ in spoken conversation or ‘N***’ on presentation slides. You can then refer to these discussion guidelines in the event of violations.

Encourage reflection and self-criticism

- **Question the statements:** You can encourage all students in the room to reflect on their own biases and privileges. For example, ask them: “Why is it so important to people to use this word, despite all the evidence of its violent connotations and historical significance? What is the need behind such behavior?”
- **The principle of error tolerance:** Create a setting that allows for learning and reflection, rather than condemning people on moral grounds. Moralistic communication often elicits a defensive response and can cause the situation to escalate. Especially if you feel that the

discriminatory remark stems from a lack of familiarity with the topic, you should avoid shaming the person. Address the problematic statement directly, refer to facts and rules, but do not make the person themselves the problem. It is recommended to separate the statement from the person. It makes a difference whether you say, “The use of that word is racist because it dates back to the colonial era and was invented to dehumanize Black people,” rather than “You use that word, so you’re a racist.” Keep in mind that this approach allows the entire seminar to learn how to deal with discriminatory statements in a constructive manner.

Aftercare

Psychosocial support: If you feel that some students found the discussion unsettling or hurtful, you can offer them the opportunity to speak with you privately or refer them to appropriate counseling services.

Case study 2:

The question of demographics comes up in a seminar. A student repeatedly comments on the issue, pointing to the low birth rates among German women and claiming that people with a migrant background are having too many children. He argues that this, coupled with rising immigration, means ‘we’ll die out if this continues’ – and that ‘Mohamed’ is already the second most common first name among newborns. Some students disagree and point out that this claim is misleading. The discussion becomes heated.

Clarify the facts and putting them in context

To address such comments, it is important to continue exploring the subject matter in class discussions, beyond the initial response and over an extended period of time in order to facilitate a learning process.

Counterargument

Multiple studies over the past few years and decades have shown a rise in authoritarian attitudes. This shows that anti-democratic attitudes are not a ‘marginal’ phenomenon, but rather are deeply entrenched in parts of the population. Such statements may therefore find fertile ground among some people. Keep in mind, therefore, that speaking out against such views can be important for all seminar participants: This can encourage other seminar participants to also take a stand and not let themselves be intimidated by politically radical statements.

- **Question and refute statements:** Require students to back up their claims with facts and to cite reliable sources. Cite current demographic data to refute the student's claims. Provide concrete facts and demonstrate that the statements are untenable. If you do not have these on hand at that moment, clearly state that you will revisit the topic in the next session – this will give you time to prepare a nuanced response.
- **Put the statements in context:** Explain why such statements are problematic and what social and political implications they may have.
- **Address inflammatory terms:** Bring up inflammatory terms like 'ethnic replacement' and do not let such terms go uncommented. Address them explicitly and show why they are problematic. Explain the historical and political connotations of the terms and their usage in far-right discourse.

Encourage reflection and self-criticism

Ask questions to encourage critical thinking: Ask the class who 'we' refers to, or why it would be a problem if the second most common first name sounded like it belonged to a migrant. Encourage students to reflect on their own positions and the implicit assumptions behind such statements.

Culture of debate

- **Discuss the idea, not the person:** Focus on the idea, not the person. Make sure the discussion is based on ideas and arguments, not ad hominem attacks. Encourage an objective and respectful discussion.
- **Regulate speaking time:** Balance speaking time: Ensure that all students have the opportunity to contribute and that no single person dominates the discussion. You can achieve this through targeted questions and moderation. In particular, if one person frequently draws attention to themselves with provocative remarks, regulate their speaking time (see also Section 3.4).
- **Prevent ad hominem escalations:** Put a stop to ad hominem attacks. Stress the importance of a factual and respectful discussion.
- **One-on-one conversations:** If a student repeatedly draws attention to themselves by making problematic statements in class, seek a conversation with them. Clearly communicate your expectations and the boundaries of acceptable behavior.
- **Limits of accessibility:** Clearly state that provocation and attempts to discredit others will not be tolerated: If it appears that the student's primary goal is to provoke others, to convince everyone in the seminar of their unacceptable opinion, or to discredit you, clearly state that such behavior is unacceptable. Indicate that you will take further action in such a case.

Case study 3:

A young woman and mother is studying to become a teacher; she is considered unassuming and friendly. The faculty is aware that she is a member of a far-right group and promotes its ideology, for example, by advising parents on parenting issues. At first glance, her teaching approach appears unremarkable. In several seminars, she has been dropping critical remarks about gender diversity (“There are only two biological genders”) and gender-inclusive language.

Other students react to her statements with a mix of agreement and confusion. During office hours, a queer student reports that the young woman confronted her in private after a seminar and threatened her with ‘consequences’ if she continued to ‘question the traditional family order’. The student is visibly upset but has no evidence or witnesses

Monitor the situation

Keep an eye on the accused student and the student targeted by the abuse in your seminar. Monitor whether the situation escalates or whether there are any further incidents, especially before or after class.

Make sure you are available and supportive

- Clearly state that you are **available** to the targeted student and that she can contact you at any time.
- Refer to the **Anti-Discrimination Office**: Inform the student about the university’s Anti-Discrimination Office and offer to put her in touch with it.
- Offer to **accompany** her: If the student feels unsafe on campus, offer to accompany her to and from the seminar. Alternatively, you can refer her to the Ruhr University Bochum’s ‘walk safe’ service.
- In instances that could constitute a criminal offense, **law enforcement authorities** may issue a so-called ‘**warning to potential offenders**’, where individuals are notified that certain actions may be punishable by law.
- If you are already aware before your first session takes place that students affiliated with extremist organizations are participating in your course, it makes sense to protect the personal details (real names, phone numbers) of all students. Instead, QR codes can be used to track attendance, for example.

Limits of accessibility

- **Accessibility in terms of habitual changes:** Be aware that it is virtually impossible for you to change the student's beliefs and worldview. Focus on supporting the student in question and ensuring a safe learning environment.

Peer counseling and support from resource centers

- **Seek advice from colleagues:** Talk to colleagues at the institute and the faculty about the situation and ask for advice on the best way to proceed.
- **Make use of resource centers:** Contact university and third-party counseling and information services to better assess the situation and receive support (see Chapter 5).

Assess sanction options

- **Assess potential sanctions:** Find out which sanctions may be imposed on the student, and determine which steps are necessary to initiate them. The Legal Department and the Anti-Discrimination Office are available to provide guidance.

Disruptions also occur in **digital teaching**. For example, a chat can escalate into coordinated 'trolling' (provocative, misleading, or offensive comments in forums or chats), disruptions in hybrid settings (when the lecture continues but the chat takes on a life of its own – potentially with discriminatory comments), as well as ongoing harassment outside the course, such as through doxing (the online collection and subsequent publication of personal data with malicious intent toward the targeted individuals) or the use of screenshots, etc. Therefore, clear moderation and escalation rules are also necessary in digital learning environments. Access controls, waiting rooms, co-hosts, clearly defined netiquette guidelines, moderation rights, and contingency measures should be explicitly communicated at the outset. Students should be aware which rules apply and what consequences disruptions will have. Instructors should receive systematic training in media literacy as it relates to digital teaching. If a rule is broken, evidence (screenshots) must be preserved.

3.4 CONFIDENCE IN HOW TO ACT THROUGH DEESCALATION

A de-escalating approach in the classroom means recognizing conflicts at an early stage and addressing them proactively before they escalate. Many potential disputes can be prevented or mitigated through such an approach, which is important for creating a positive and safe classroom environment. The following examples of appropriate responses are intended to show lecturers how to maintain control of the situation, even when they cannot control the contributors to a discussion and what they say.



Fig. 3: Escalation stages in a classroom setting

To identify when intervention is necessary as early as possible, it is helpful to understand the **strategies and patterns of extremist communication** that aim to normalize (right-wing) extremist positions in public discourse and political debate

Such strategies include:

- deliberate provocation
- dog whistles (messages with a hidden double meaning that are understood primarily by 'insiders', often with discriminatory connotations)
- breaking taboos
- self-victimization
- shifting the goalposts of discourse
- using freedom of speech as a pretext
- delegitimization of science
- deliberately causing outrage
- coordinated disruptions
- interrupting and speaking over others (aggressive debating tactics used, for example, to normalize racist views)
- pushing the boundaries ("What can you say here?")
- labeling certain fields of research as 'ideology'

Teachers should be able to recognize these typical patterns so that they do not inadvertently contribute to reinforcing them, and so that they can more quickly assess what they are dealing with, rather than focusing solely on what was said.

3.5 HOUSE RULES: WHEN AND HOW MAY I EXCLUDE STUDENTS FROM LECTURES AND SEMINARS?

The house rules should be invoked as a last resort and only under certain circumstances. They may be applied in the event of a serious disruption that makes it impossible to continue the session. The house rules are intended to ensure the safety and orderly conduct of lectures and seminars.

Examples of serious disruptions:

- constantly interrupting others
- throwing items
- physical harassment
- verbal threats

Please note: Controversial opinions do not constitute serious disruptions.

Incitement, in particular Holocaust denial or a blatant insult, is a criminal offense and constitutes a serious disruption. However, not every controversial opinion constitutes a criminal offense. Freedom of speech protects unrestricted discussion, even on controversial topics. Accordingly, it can sometimes be difficult to draw the line between permissible speech and criminal offenses. Students are entitled to insist on a controversial opinion; but if transgressive statements are made so frequently and forcefully that they serve only to provoke and no longer allow for an objective debate, the line into disruption has been crossed.

Step-by-step response to a serious disruption of a lecture or seminar

The setting: In a seminar with 35 students, one student repeatedly speaks up without being prompted, interrupts, and makes disparaging comments about other students' contributions. This person continues to do so despite your repeated requests to follow the discussion rules. After being repeatedly explicitly reprimanded, the person throws a pen across the room. The other students appear unsettled.

Step 1: Identifying a serious disruption

The disruptive behavior continues despite warnings and potentially endangers other participants; this means the threshold for a **serious disruption** has been crossed. The session cannot continue, or can only continue under significant limitations. It is not necessary for the session to become completely unfeasible in order to conclude that a serious disruption has occurred.

Step 2: Issuing an expulsion (right to enforce house rules)

State the expulsion clearly and matter-of-factly:

“I am exercising my right to enforce house rules. You are now instructed to leave today’s session.

Set a clear expectation: “Please leave the room now.”

Avoid discussing the decision during the ongoing session.

Please note: In this context, the house rules apply to a temporary removal from the **current session**.

Step 3: Call in security (in case of resistance)

If the student refuses to leave the session, you have the option of calling in the Ruhr University Bochum’s security service. To do so, suspend the session and contact the control center (phone: 23333: ‘two and four times three’), providing the room number and describing the situation. The security service will be dispatched from there, and the police will be notified if necessary. If you are teaching at an off-campus location, contact the police directly. Do not continue to argue with the person causing the disturbance; your own safety and that of your students takes priority.

Step 4: Documentation and reporting

Immediately after class, draft a note summarizing the facts (date, time, sequence of events, specific statements). Also, notify your dean’s office and, if necessary, the Legal Department (phone: 0234 32/28932) without delay. They will determine whether further measures – such as a long-term ban from the premises – are necessary. Only the Rector can impose a long-term suspension. Other severe disciplinary measures may be ordered by the Disciplinary Committee, if necessary.

4. PROMOTING DEMOCRACY IN THE CLASS-ROOM

4.1 DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCE AS AN EDUCATIONAL GOAL IN HIGHER EDUCATION LAW

The previous chapter discussed teaching situations in which lecturers are called upon to act to protect democratic values. Democracy can also be promoted in the classroom independently of such challenging situations. Educational processes can play an important role in strengthening democratic awareness and the ability to act democratically.

The fact that this is not merely a theoretical prospect, but rather an explicit goal of higher education, is reflected in higher education law. Specifically, the focus on democracy in academia is explicitly enshrined in the Framework Act on Higher Education.

- “Teaching and academic study shall prepare students for a professional career and provide them with the necessary specialized knowledge, skills, and methods (...) in such a way that they are equipped to engage in academic or artistic work and to act **responsibly within a free, democratic, and social state governed by the rule of law.**” (Section 7 of the Framework Act on Higher Education, Objectives of Higher Education)

This concept has been elaborated at various legal levels, such as in the Model Statute of the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, which is important for accreditation processes:

- “The dimension of personal development also encompasses the future civic, political, and cultural roles of graduates. Upon graduation, students **should be able to play a decisive role in shaping social processes in a critical and reflective manner, with a sense of responsibility and a commitment to democratic values.**“ (Section 11 of the Conference of Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs’ Model Statute, Qualification Goals and Degree Level)

4.2 DEMOCRATIC COMPETENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THEORY AND STATUS QUO

Democracy education, as defined by the aforementioned legal provisions, does not refer to remedial courses in political education. It is not about specific course modules that, for example, explain how

the German Bundestag operates (even though such modules certainly have their value). Instead, it is about broader educational goals – namely, ensuring that students, upon graduation, are able to navigate a democracy with confidence and actively participate in it.

What does that mean, specifically? Efforts have been made to develop theoretical models of the dimensions of democratic competence, both in the context of schools and higher education. One example is the concept paper “Competences for Democratic Culture”, published by the Council of Europe in 2016. It distinguishes a total of 20 competencies across four dimensions – values, attitudes, skills, and knowledge and critical understanding – including, for example, an individual’s confidence in their own ability to act, tolerance for ambiguity, capacity for learning, analytical and critical thinking, teamwork skills, and communication skills. It is clear that these competencies overlap in many ways with what is described in models of scientific literacy. To put it bluntly, one could say: As students undergo academic training, they simultaneously acquire the competencies that also make them competent citizens of a democracy. But is that really the case?

sheer number of examples of enemies of democracy who have earned a college degree alone refutes this thesis – or at the very least qualifies it. Clearly, a college degree should not be confused with a certificate of democratic competence, according to research: An empirical study published in 2025 (Behm et al.: “Schafft Wissen Demokratie?“[“Does Knowledge Create Democracy?“]) examined the extent to which universities typically address democratic education as an educational goal and whether there is evidence that a university degree strengthens democratic competence. The results were sobering: The question of democracy played no significant role either in universities’ public image regarding teaching or in internal processes for ensuring the quality of degree programs. Unsurprisingly, students also showed no significant gains in democratic competence. The equation of ‘university degree = democratic competence’ is therefore not a given.

What needs to be done? At the institutional level, the study cited above provides guidance: Universities must make democracy a more explicit goal of their degree programs, and there must be greater emphasis on translating this strategy into specific degree programs through internal processes. A certificate in democratic competence, which is to be drafted jointly by Ruhr University Bochum and TU Dortmund University, is explicitly dedicated to the concept of democracy; it can be earned over the course of 3-4 semesters through individual modules (including practical components). In addition, there are two main approaches available to members of the teaching staff: 1) deliberately addressing learning objectives relevant to democracy, and 2) structuring their teaching methodology in a way that strengthens democratic competencies.

4.3 DEMOCRACY EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

Learning objectives are broken down into subject-specific and interdisciplinary objectives:

- **Subject-specific learning objectives:** At the subject-specific level, the objective can be defined as ensuring that students are able to act with democratic competence in situations

relevant to their field. These objectives can be illustrated with concrete examples, since graduates of all degree programs must later be capable of acting effectively in a democratic environment. This applies equally to students of political science who might potentially assume a role in parliament, to mechanical engineers who may later have to advocate for the construction of a wind turbine at a town hall meeting, and to scientists who might serve as expert advisors on legislative proposals. It seems important to prepare students for such scenarios, to define the relevant objectives, to address them in the curriculum and to assess them (with regard to the students' ability to act).

- **Interdisciplinary learning objectives:** Interdisciplinary objectives can be defined independently of subject-specific, foreseeable scenarios. They pertain to overarching competencies such as critical thinking, applying methodology, and tolerating contradictions and ambiguity. These aspects can also be specifically addressed and linked to democracy.

Lecturers sometimes view the drafting of learning objectives as a mere formality. However, it is only when a lecturer has a clear objective that they can consciously tailor their teaching to that objective and assess its effectiveness.

The second approach to democracy education is teaching methodology. To put it in simple terms, a class where the lecturer prioritizes their own position, limits the number of questions, and rejects criticism of their position does little to foster the democratic competence of students. Whereas formats that highlight different perspectives and encourage critique and collaboration among students offer more opportunities for democracy education.

At times, the term 'deliberative methods' is used in this context; that means that methods are prioritized that facilitate discursive debate and the continuous questioning of positions, and that consider the persuasive power of arguments to be a most valuable asset. An easy way for lecturers to promote this method is by asking resp. prompting questions. Structured approaches – such as inquiry-based learning, in which students practice critically analyzing accessible research questions – are also effective. When implementing such approaches, it is important to note that deliberative methods are quite demanding, both due to the hierarchies inherent in higher education institutions and due to personal dispositions. Moreover, arguments in academic discussions are often simply presented side by side without ultimately working toward a solution or a consensus. A more comprehensive didactic scenario would include reflections on solutions, on the quality of arguments, and on possible consensus.

In addition to deliberative methods, other methodological approaches exist for engaging students in line with democracy-related learning objectives. While at university, they can experience their self-efficacy in addressing societal issues, for example by working on tasks of social, cultural, political, and economic relevance in real-world scenarios. Approaches such as 'service learning' and 'Education for Sustainable Development' offer concepts for this purpose. The integration of teaching and citizen science – i.e. the involvement of the public in student research – also opens up methodological opportunities.

From a methodological perspective, it is crucial to seek out teaching formats that focus on discourse, understanding, and self-efficacy.

4.4 PRINCIPLES OF POLITICAL EDUCATION

The above considerations have outlined political learning objectives and methodologies that promote democracy in a general sense. When we turn our attention to explicit political discussions and explicit political education at the university level, there is no established conceptual guideline to chart a course forward. However, colleges and universities can draw inspiration in this area from secondary schools, where the so-called Beutelsbach Consensus has long served as a guide for such teaching scenarios. Adapted to the higher education context, it focuses on three simple principles:

- **Prohibition against overwhelming the student:** It is not permissible to catch pupils unprepared or unaware for the sake of imparting desirable opinions and to hinder them from forming an independent judgment (no indoctrination).
- **Treating controversial subjects as controversial:** Lecturers must ensure that no options are overlooked and that alternatives are discussed even when they go against mainstream opinion.
- **Ability to act:** Students should learn to analyze political scenarios, to form their own opinion and to develop the ability to act (in order to make an impact in the scenario).

The Beutelsbach Consensus must not be misunderstood as a call for political neutrality. This is because, first, it does not relieve teachers of their duty to uphold the Constitution, and second, it aims to make political positions a topic of discussion. Lecturers are permitted to make their position clear, as long as there is no indoctrination and students are permitted to voice opposing views.

The principles of political education in the school context have since been refined and many concepts developed. For example, the ‘Frankfurt Declaration’ focuses more strongly on power balance in the context of educational work. Such position papers provide valuable guidance on how to structure such scenarios to lecturers who explicitly wish to engage in political discussions in their courses.

5. FOLLOW-UP INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

5.1 RESOURCE CENTERS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

If you have any questions, concerns, or need advice, Ruhr University Bochum provides in-house resources that are available to you as a member of the teaching staff:

The Ruhr University Bochum's **Anti-Discrimination Office** is the central guidance, mediation, and information resource for students, staff, and other members of the university who experience or witness discrimination and have questions or need support regarding this issue.



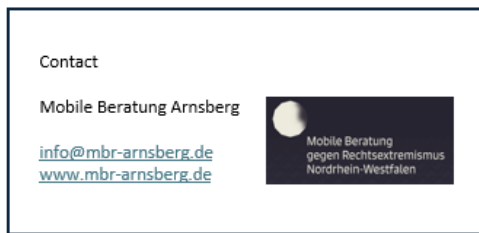
The **Centre for Teaching and Learning (ZfW)** supports lecturers in planning, conducting, and evaluating their teaching. If you intend to develop new teaching formats, improve your teaching methods, or if you require feedback, the ZfW offers professional development, consulting, and personalized support.



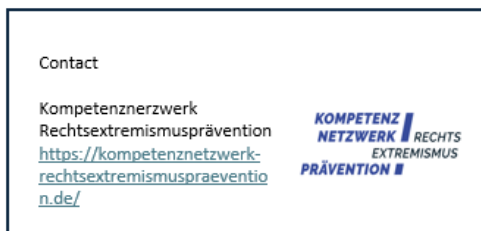
In addition, you have the option of contacting specialized third-party agencies if you need support with specific cases:

The **Bundesverband Mobile Beratung (BMB)**, i.e. the federal association of mobile counseling teams against right-wing extremism, in North Rhine-Westphalia provides guidance on issues related to racism, anti-Semitism, anti-feminism, and conspiracy theories, and works with you to develop strategies for action. Furthermore, the BMB supports organizations in addressing these issues over the long term and developing strategies in this area.

Bochum falls into the purview of Mobile Beratung in Arnsberg.



The **Kompetenznetzwerk Rechtsextremismusprävention**, i.e. competence network for the prevention of right-wing extremism, is a central point of contact and resource for anyone dealing with right-wing extremism. The network's five organizations pool the expertise, contacts, and partnerships they have built up over the years, thus collaborating to strengthen efforts to prevent right-wing extremism.



The **ufuq** association is committed to a democratic and diverse society and strives to combat religiously and politically motivated extremism. Through educational programs, counseling, and preventive measures, ufuq promotes democratic values and fosters acceptance of diversity.



5.2 LINKS TO ONLINE DATABANKS AND INFORMATION PORTALS

Federal Agency for Civic Education (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung/bpb)
(links to German-language pages)

- [Radicalization and extremism](#)
- [Information Portal on Right-Wing Extremism](#)
- [InfoPool on Right-Wing Extremism](#)
- [Information Pool on Islamism](#)
- [Information Portal on Left-Wing Extremism](#)

Amadeu Antonio Foundation

- [Information portal on right-wing extremism and discrimination](#)

Data portal for Racism and Right-Wing Extremism Research (DP-R|EX)

- [Central data infrastructure for primary researchers and data users](#)

Responding to Right-Wing Attacks on Science (GERDEA research association & Bundesverband Mobile Beratung)

- [Handout](#) (German-language version)

5.3 IDENTIFICATION CODES AND CODES USED BY EXTREMIST GROUPS

Extremist groups frequently use symbols and numerical or alphabetic codes to spread their ideological messages without being immediately recognized as extremist. It is important for members of the teaching staff to recognize and understand these codes so they can identify them in the classroom and on campus. These codes can appear in various contexts, ranging from clothing and accessories to language, graffiti, and stickers. Such groups deliberately ensure that their codes are understood only to people who are already part of the in-group (so-called “*dog whistles*”). Like dog whistles, which produce sounds at a frequency inaudible to humans, these codes are intended to be perceptible only to insiders. For example, the far right uses a variety of symbols that are often historically rooted; numerical codes are also frequently employed.

See below for to examples of two codes, as you might encounter them on the Ruhr University Bochum's campus:

The following codes are based on where the letters are positioned in the alphabet.

1161

The numerical code stands for AAFA – Anti-Antifascist Action, or Anti-Antifa for short. The term Anti-Antifa is used in the far-right scene to target political opponents, sometimes in connection with intimidation or enemy lists. The number appears, for example, on clothing, in social media profiles, or as graffiti. At Ruhr University Bochum, the code frequently appears as graffiti, e.g. in connection with the attacks on various university facilities in the summer of 2025.

88

This numerical code is used for 'Heil Hitler'. On the Ruhr University Bochum's campus, this code appears as graffiti or on repurposed 30-km/h speed limit signs.

Please note: These symbols and codes are constantly being adapted to suit specific contexts and to avoid detection. New codes are continually emerging, while old ones are being replaced or reinterpreted. Therefore, it is crucial to keep up to date on current developments and remain vigilant.

For more examples, go here (links to German-language pages):

- [Right-Wing Extremist Codes](#)
- [Symbols of Left-Wing Extremism](#)
- [Islamic Codes](#)

5.4 GUIDELINES ON HOW TO APPROACH CODES AND SYMBOLS ON CAMPUS

If you notice graffiti, vandalism, stickers, or other visual expressions by far-right groups on campus, please document them by noting the location, date, and, if possible, taking a photo, and forward this information to the Anti-Discrimination Office and Department 5 (Facilities Management) with a request for their removal. If, however, you encounter students who wear such symbols on their clothing, you should not intervene unless they are symbols of anti-constitutional or terrorist organizations, such as the swastika or the flag of the Islamic State (IS).

Enforcing criminal law is not the responsibility of members of the teaching staff – you lack the authority to do so under administrative law. Report any such incident to the Legal Department (for

the purpose of filing a criminal complaint). Exclusion from a course is only possible in the event of a serious disruption (see Chapter 3.5: House Rules).

Contact:

Anti-Discrimination Office: antidiskriminierung@rub.de

Administrative Department 5: dez5-helpdesk@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

Legal Department: justitiariat@ruhr-uni-bochum.de

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