

» Opinion

Ethics Rules for Academic Science?

Big companies have their own corporate governance code. Members of parliament agree to abide by an ethics code to disclose conflicts of interest. More and more industries establish codes of conduct aimed at greater transparency.

This debate has also reached academic science. In January, the American Economic Association adopted new conflict-of-interest rules. This month the German-speaking economists associated in the Verein für Sozialpolitik followed suit with their own code of conduct.

These ethical guidelines are not just about creating transparency in dealing with economic issues and the question whether research activities, media appearances and policy advice might be influenced by outside funding. They are also about researchers' non-financial ties to political parties, churches, labor unions or business associations. In addition, these guidelines define proper scientific conduct.

I welcome this debate and I have pushed strongly for it within the IZA network. In labor economics, the focus on empirical research is particularly strong. Beyond data analysis, labor economists are often engaged in media activities and policy advice. Sound rules of conduct therefore have a long tradition in our field.

Against this background, IZA has developed its own code of ethics based on recommendations from our own committee of international scholars. The "IZA Guiding Principles of Research Integrity" were communicated to our network members and after discussions posted online in April 2012. We are pleased to have received a lot of positive feedback from around the world and requests by other institutions to copy the content of our guidelines for their own purposes.

IZA is recognized as a non-profit, non-partisan institution whose scientific independence is laid down in its statutes. Thanks to a solid funding base provided by the Deutsche Post Foundation and additional funding from various institutions worldwide, IZA is independent from commissioned research and faces no restrictions concerning its research topics and advisory activities. We have made this transparent on our homepage and in our publications from the very beginning.

The more than 1,200 international researchers affiliated with IZA, who have by now contributed over 6,800 studies to the IZA Discussion Paper Series and other IZA outlets, are responsible for their own funding. Consequently, IZA's research output reflects the broad knowledge base of today's labor economics with all its facets and alternative scientific approaches.

The important debate on ethics in scientific research, however, should not be misused as a weapon in social policy battles nor against research competitors. Unfortunately, the internet also serves as an increasingly explosive platform for precisely these purposes. In many cases those (typically anonymous) commentators who decry the lack of ethical principles in scientific research fail to engage in ethical behavior themselves. Fairness and the quest for truth must be the basic principles guiding the debate.

Media representatives should also abide by the ethical standards of their profession. Given instances of misconduct, they should get their own house in order first.



► www.iza.org/link/researchintegrity



Klaus F. Zimmermann



Institute for the Study of Labor



Editor: **Prof. Dr. Klaus F. Zimmermann**
 Managing Editors: **Mark Fallak, Holger Hinte**
 Address: IZA, P.O. Box 7240, 53072 Bonn, Germany
 Phone: **+49 (0) 228 - 38 94 223**
 Fax: **+49 (0) 228 - 38 94 510**
 E-Mail: **compact@iza.org**
 Web: **www.iza.org**
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