

Appendix E1: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE DOCTORAL CANDIDATE PLEDGE

What is going to change?

It has been a long tradition for supervisors at Utrecht University to administer a specific pledge to the doctoral candidates during the doctoral thesis defence ceremony. Among other things, this declaration includes the following text: "By virtue of the authority conferred on us by law and according to the decision of the Doctoral Examination Committee present at this session, I hereby confer upon you ... (*doctoral candidate's first and surname*) the doctoral degree (*if applicable: to which, due to your outstanding merits I may add the designation "cum laude"*) to which are attached all rights and obligations towards science and society as laid down by law and custom."

The university set out the specific rights and obligations in the *Instructions to the doctoral candidate*, a guideline for doctoral candidates with regard to the doctoral thesis defence ceremony. The doctoral candidate's rights refer to the use of the title of Doctor, the obligations to having to comply with the current code of conduct on integrity and the corresponding core values, among other things. In September 2014, the Board for the Conferral of Doctoral Degrees decided, within the framework of the university integrity policy, to change the implicit referral to integrity into a more explicit and active one. As from 1 October 2015, the doctoral candidate, therefore, will actively pronounce a pledge to confirm these values.

What are the exact words of the pledge?

Supervisor: "Do you promise always to perform your duties according to the principles of academic integrity: honestly and scrupulously, critically and transparently, independently and impartially?"
Doctoral candidate: "I promise."

What is the text based on?

All universities adhere to the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice which contains the principles of good academic teaching and research. These principles have been laid down by the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU).

What does the pledge entail?

The pledge does not refer to religion. The key point is that the doctoral candidate promises that they will faithfully act in conformity with the current standards and values.

Why is the pledge actively pronounced?

The university attaches great value to everyone taking their responsibility in safeguarding the honest academic practice. The following is one of seven behavioural guidelines the university has laid down in the *Utrecht University Code of Conduct for Scrupulous Academic Practice and Integrity (2014)*: "At Utrecht University, all staff, students and other parties involved in teaching and research activities have a personal responsibility regarding the maintaining of a scrupulous and honest academic practice." As a practical translation into policy the taking of the oath/pledge is included in this guideline (<https://intranet.uu.nl/wetenschappelijke-integriteit> see page 3). Through the public taking of the pledge, this responsibility is once again actively confirmed. It is to be presumed that this will contribute to the raising and maintaining of awareness for this individual responsibility.

Why is the pledge taken at the end of the doctoral degree track?

By taking the pledge, the doctoral candidate promises to continue to adhere to the code. This, therefore, is a forward-looking promise. At the start of the doctoral degree track, the doctoral candidate will already have signed the Training and Supervision Agreement, which refers to the VSNU code of conduct: *By signing this agreement the PhD candidate declares that he/she will maintain and promote scrupulous scientific conduct and will adhere to the rules laid down in the Netherlands Code of Conduct for Academic Practice.*

Does taking the pledge have any effect?

If and to what extent taking the pledge really will contribute to the doctoral candidate's perceived awareness and the observing of the code of conduct remains a matter of opinion. It certainly does not do any harm either.

Outside of the university too there is debate about the introduction of oath/pledge-taking in various professional groups. Other than the confirmation of existing standards and values, the oath or pledge in itself seems abstract and meaningless. Scrupulousness and integrity are about choices for specific behaviour. Jonathan Soeharno, in his inaugural lecture about the value of the oath, cites Aeschylus, author of the Oresteia: "It is not the oath that makes a person reliable, it is the person who makes the oath reliable."ⁱ Bankers, doctors, judges, scientists, all of these professionals in the execution of their work will have to relate to the values within their professional group. The oath/pledge only really will become meaningful when people are being confronted with concrete dilemmas in their professional practice. That is why the pledge should be seen within the context of a range of measures the university has taken to bring up for discussion specific dilemmas in the field of integrity and scrupulousness. One of these measures is that all programmes, including the doctoral degree programme, have now incorporated the theme of scrupulous academic practice and integrity.

ⁱ The value of the oath. Inaugural lecture given by Professor of Administration of Justice and Legal Theory at the University of Amsterdam, Jonathan E. Soeharno, on Wednesday 22 May 2013 [2004 graduate and 2008 PhD degree from Utrecht University].