



**DECISION  
OF THE CENTRAL ACADEMIC  
ETHICS COMMISSION OF VILNIUS UNIVERSITY**

**On the appeal of /.../ association of 23 October 2023**

The Central Academic Ethics Commission (hereinafter the ‘Commission’) received an appeal of a third person /.../ association (hereinafter the ‘Applicant’) registered on 23 October 2023 regarding potential violations of scientific research ethics in the master thesis of V. M., graduate of the /Unit/. The appeal states that the research presented in V. M.’s master thesis was carried out in violation of ethics requirements and without informing the participants of the research. It is claimed that, although the introduction to the thesis states that *“In total, seventeen semi-structured interviews were organised with the heads of /.../ institutions or representatives of administrations. The interview schedules and questions can be seen (Annex 2 and Annex 4). The following institutions participated in the interview: /a list of institutions is provided/. All heads of institutions/administrations were asked the same questions, so that no additional data which is not necessary for the research is created”*, the heads of the listed institutions or administration were not informed about the participation in the research, were not familiarised with the ethics of the research, and did not receive the questions set out in the Annex 2 to the final thesis (these claims are supported by the signatures of the heads of the aforementioned institutions). The appeal also raises questions about the authenticity of the research carried out during the preparation of the final thesis and the representativeness of the data therein.

At the request of the Commission, V. M. provided written explanations stating that he did not agree with the claims made in the appeal and indicated that he prepared his master thesis in the autumn of 2022 and received oral consent to participate in the research in accordance with the requirements in force at that time, as for the data on informing the heads of the institutions orally, by recording it on audio – he had no obligation to save it, thus he didn’t. He based his participation in the visits during which the surveys were carried out on the testimonies of witnesses. Also, neither the master thesis supervisor nor the reviewer submitted their comments on the procedure of conducting surveys during the preparation or defence of the master thesis. V. M. also asked to assess whether the appeal investigated by the Commission was not lodged late, in breach of Item 21 of the Commission Regulations.

Having familiarised itself with the Applicant’s appeal, V. M.’s master thesis and the explanations he provided as well as their accompanying documents, explanations of V. M.’s master

thesis supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr D. S., as well as the requirements for the term papers and final theses of bachelor and master study programmes applied at the /Unit/, having analysed the appeal during the meetings of 27 October and 27 November of this year, the Commission hereby notes:

1. In its activities, the Commission is guided by the Code of Academic Ethics of Vilnius University approved by the Senate of Vilnius University (current version approved by Resolution of the Senate of Vilnius University No. SPN-54 of 21 October 2020) (hereinafter the 'Code of Academic Ethics') and the Regulations of the Central Academic Ethics Commission of Vilnius University (current version approved by Resolution of the Senate of Vilnius University No. SPN-55 of 21 October 2020) (hereinafter the 'Commission Regulations'). The Code of Academic Ethics describes the standards and principles of ethical behaviour of community members, which must be observed both within the University and outside of it (Item 1 of the Code of Academic Ethics), and also provides examples of unacceptable behaviour at the University and guidelines for the examination of cases of possible violations of academic ethics. The Commission Regulations define the Commission's competence, the decisions that it can possibly make, and describe the Commission's operating procedures. In accordance with the competency specified in these legal acts, the Commission shall examine only issues related to potential violations of academic ethics and shall not make any comments on other issues and assumptions set out in the documents submitted by the parties.

2. In accordance with Item 13(7) of the Commission Regulations, the Commission shall have the right to investigate appeals submitted directly to the Commission regarding potential violations of academic ethics that took place at the units of Vilnius University. Such appeals, like all the other appeals, in accordance with Item 21 of the Commission Regulations, may be lodged to the Commission no later than within one month from the date when the possible violation of academic ethics was committed or established. This is essentially a limitation period (i.e., if it is missed, the Commission shall not have the right to examine the appeal) and it can only be renewed if there are important reasons for the missed term and a reasoned request from the applicant, if no more than six months have elapsed since the potential violation was committed or established. The Commission notes that, in the present case, it is not possible to determine the moment of establishing the fact of the potential violation of the norms of academic ethics from which the deadline for appealing to the Commission is calculated, since the Applicant is a third party who did not have the obligation to familiarise themselves with the master thesis in question during its preparation, defence or any other specific period. Taking that into account, it shall be considered that the limitation period for lodging an appeal for investigation is not missed and the Commission has the right and competency to investigate it.

3. Having familiarised itself with the available material, the Commission concludes that the potential violations of academic ethics are related to the legality of the surveys carried out during

the preparation of the final thesis: properly informing the survey subjects and receiving their consent to participate in the survey. However, a violation of these requirements can only be concluded if such requirements are established in the legal acts of the University in force at the time of the preparation of the master thesis. After examining the legal acts regulating the preparation of master theses at the /Unit/, the Commission noted that during the preparation of the master thesis in question, the requirements in force at the time did not provide for the requirement to inform the subjects (heads or employees of the institutions where surveys are conducted) of the surveys conducted when preparing the final theses in writing or to receive their written consent to participate in such surveys (only a general requirement “The ethics of research must be observed when conducting and presenting the results of the research” is established in the requirements approved by the study programme committee).

Nor did the legal acts provide for the requirement to permanently store the consent of the survey subjects or the consent of their heads to carry out such surveys in any form (the requirements approved by the study programme committee lay down only the obligation of the author of the final thesis to store the primary research data, such as completed questionnaires, access to the online survey portal, interview recordings, monitoring protocols and other research material until the end of the work of the final theses defence commission). During the investigation of the appeal, both V. M. and his master thesis supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr D. S. confirmed that so far, the rules of conducting surveys at the /Unit/ have not been detailed, therefore, in practice, it was enough to inform the survey subjects and get their consent orally. The supervisor and V. M. confirmed that oral consents to conduct the survey were given, but were not preserved in any form, since this was not required under the regulation in force. Since it is not possible to either confirm or deny this fact, the Commission concluded that during the preparation of V. M.’s master thesis, the surveys were carried out without breaching the requirements of the time and the requirements of academic ethics were not violated.

4. The Commission hereby also points out that informing the subjects in writing about the intention to conduct surveys and obtaining written consent from the subjects or their heads to conduct such surveys is a common practice in many areas of science. This allows to ensure the awareness of the survey subjects, legitimise the research conducted, and reduce the possibility of potential violations of academic ethics in the preparation of the final thesis. Taking it into account, the Commission recommends the administration of the /Unit/ to revise the procedure for the preparation of final theses by specifying the procedure for conducting surveys and research when preparing final theses and the requirements for the ethics of theses preparation.

5. The Commission hereby notes that, in accordance with Item 39 of the Commission Regulations, the depersonalised decisions of the Commission (or summaries thereof) are published on the University’s website. The Commission explains that it is done with the aim to more clearly define the ethical standards applied at the University, to make the University community aware of the

examples of inappropriate and intolerable behaviour, the examples of good practice in the activities of commissions, and to promote following the principles of academic ethics introduced and fostered by the University in their activities at the University and beyond.

In the light of the foregoing, in accordance with Items 13(7), 35(2) and 35(12) of the Regulations of the Central Academic Ethics Commission, the Central Academic Ethics Commission hereby decides:

1. To conclude that there were no violations of academic ethics determined in V. M.'s actions when preparing his master thesis.

2. To submit recommendations to the administration of the /Unit/ to revise the procedure for the preparation of final theses by specifying the procedure for conducting surveys and research, and the requirements for the ethics of theses preparation.

The Commission's decision was adopted unanimously at the meeting attended by 7 of the 8 members of the Commission.

Chairperson

Assoc. Prof. Dr Vígita Vèbraitè