

Using non-German doctor titles and academic degrees in Germany

Titles and academic degrees play a part of daily life in Germany, be it on bank accounts, letter heads, visiting cards or even letter boxes. In this context a "title" is pre-nominal, for instance "Dr.", while a degree is post-nominal, for instance "M.Sc." As recently as 1990 many non-German doctor titles could not be used in Germany at all and many degrees could only be used with an indication of their origin (for example "Ph.D. (Univ. Leeds)"). Recent changes in the law - in Bavaria this occurred in 2006 - have relaxed some of these restrictions and could benefit many colleagues with non-German doctor titles and degrees.

This is a serious issue, since using an unauthorized title or degree remains a criminal offence under §132a StGB, punishable by up to a year in prison. Such things are "Ländersache" and each German federal state has its own "Hochschulengesetz" dealing with such matters, each interpreting the same "Beschluß der Kultusministerkonferenz". A key source of official information on the situation in each federal state can be found at: <http://www.anabin.de/>

Briefly, the present situation can be summarized as follows. Restrictions on the use of non-German doctor titles and degrees in Germany remain, but have been relaxed for doctor titles and degrees from countries of the EU and the European Economic Area. A general requirement is that the title or degree be from a recognised course of study at a recognised university. These are listed on the www.anabin.de web-site. Most normal UK universities and courses fulfil these requirements. With this proviso, those with a doctorate such as a "Doctor of Philosophy" may now use the title "Dr." Similarly, a degree may now be used in the form in which it was awarded on the degree certificate or its recognized or usual abbreviation in the country of origin, a list of which is also available on the same web-site.

In other words, those with a Ph.D can now use a doctor title in the form "Dr. John Smith" and those with a "Master of Science" can now use this in the form "John Smith M.Sc." It is difficult to generalise about Bachelor degrees, since so many subtle variations exist. To take one example, a degree which, according to the degree certificate, is a "Bachelor of science with second class honours first division" would, in the light of the anabin.de web-site, probably be abbreviated to "B.Sc. (Hons)." In the end it is up to each individual to make sure that they can prove that the recognized or usual abbreviation in the UK of a British qualification is being used.

Alan Teale, 21st February 2007