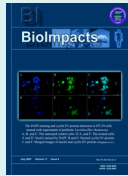




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On the issue of transparency on the internal investigation of academic bullying

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Diminishing academic bullying in science requires attention and collaborative action by all members of the scientific community.^{1,2} Recent reports on the actions from critical stakeholders (including UK^{3,4} and US⁵ top funding agencies and US national academies⁶) against academic bullying and/or sexual harassment are encouraging. For example, NIH action on removing funding from 75 principal investigators (PIs), out of over 300 complaints of various types of harassment, since 2018 is remarkable.⁵ Such actions from stakeholders other than academic institutions can increase trust and confidence among targets which will hopefully result in more reporting of the harassment. We have already seen increases in the number of bullying reports to NIH for 2018, 2019, and 2020 at 1, 14, and 26, respectively.⁵

Although the actions by these stakeholders are promising, recent reports^{7,8} on the actions of academic institutions, as one of the main stakeholders, on academic bullying and/or sexual harassment are concerning. These reports, among many others,⁹ imply that compelling cases of bullying and/or sexual harassment are not fairly, timely, and efficiently adjudicated at the institutional level.¹⁰ For example, the cases of various types of harassment^{7,8} at Harvard went on for decades and there were hundreds of complainants during this long period. However, the university's corrective actions were not initiated earlier for unclear reasons. As another example, Lund University failed to act properly following multiple reports of bullying over the years against two powerful professors (e.g., with influential positions across Europe; e.g., chair of Sweden's National Committee for Astronomy).¹¹ These representative reports are very concerning, as most high-ranked universities have clear policies and protocols on addressing academic bullying and/or sexual harassment^{7,8}; however, in actions, it seems that there is lack of transparency on whether and how these written protocols

and policies are followed by investigation committees. The targets, on the other hand, have few options after receiving biased or little consideration of their cases by these universities. Further, the legal approach is almost never an option due to the defense mechanism of hiring powerful lawyers by institutions to protect them from legal harm.

The other concerning aspect of these reports is the lack of accountability for the internal investigation committees. After decades of harassment by powerful perpetrators at Harvard University for example, when finally, the university took action against them, there was no accountability for the committee members who adjudicated earlier cases.^{7,8} Further, there is no trace of statements from or opinions of these committee members in such reports.

In sum, the scientific community should i) demand more transparency from the institutional internal investigation process and ii) require members of investigation committees to be more accountable and transparent in their decisions. After all, many lives and even scientific integrity have been significantly affected by academic bullying and/or sexual harassment. It is high time to diminish these behaviors in our science backyard.

Ethical statement

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Morteza Mahmoudi discloses that (i) he is a co-founder and director of the Academic Parity Movement (<https://paritymovement.org>), a non-profit organization dedicated to addressing academic discrimination, violence, and incivility, and (ii) he receives royalties/honoraria for his published books, plenary lectures, and licensed patents. Sherry Moss and Loreleigh Keashly are the Advisory Board on the Academic Parity Movement.

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