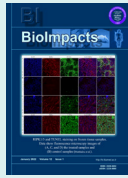




Article Info



Article Type:

Letter to the Editor

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

Morteza Mahmoudi^{1*}, Sherry Moss², Loreleigh Keashly³

¹Department of Radiology and Precision Health Program, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA

²School of Business, Wake Forest University, NC, USA

³Department of Communication, Wayne State University, MI, USA

Received 9 July 2021, Accepted 16 July 2021, ePublished 6 September 2021

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.

References

1. Mahmoudi M, Keashly L. Filling the space: a framework for coordinated global actions to diminish academic bullying.



*Corresponding author: Morteza Mahmoudi, Email: mahmou22@msu.edu



© 2022 The Author(s). This work is published by BioImpacts as an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). Non-commercial uses of the work are permitted, provided the original work is properly cited.

- Angewandte Chemie* **2021**; 133: 3378-84. <https://doi.org/10.1002/anie.202009270>
2. Mahmoudi M. Academic bullying: How to be an ally. *Science* **2021**; 373: 974. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abl7492>
 3. Bullying and harassment policy. <https://wellcome.org/grant-funding/guidance/bullying-and-harassment-policy>.
 4. Else H. Report harassment or risk losing funding, says top UK science funder. *Nature* **2018**; 557: 149. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-05071-7>
 5. Kaiser J. More than 70 lab heads removed from NIH grants after harassment findings. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2021/06/nih-removed-more-70-lab-heads-grants-after-harassment-complaints>.
 6. Ortega RP. National Academy of Sciences ejects biologist Francisco Ayala in the wake of sexual harassment findings. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2021/06/national-academy-sciences-ejects-biologist-francisco-ayala-wake-sexual-harassment>.
 7. Hutton A. Harvard apologizes to sexual assault victims after a review found it did little to address multiple harassment claims over nearly 40 YEARS against a powerful professor - and instead promoted him to vice provost. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9229181/Harvard-apologised-ex-student-sexually-assaulted-professor-1980s.html>.
 8. Gibbons A. Harvard bans former anthropology chair after finding persistent sexual harassment. <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2021/06/harvard-bans-former-anthropology-chair-after-finding-persistent-sexual-harassment>.
 9. Else H. Top geneticist loses £3.5-million grant in first test of landmark bullying policy. *Nature* **2018**; 560: 420. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-06009-9>
 10. Goulet TL. Institutions key to inclusion and equity. *Science* **2021**; 373: 170-171. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abj8196>
 11. Witze A. Astronomers victimized colleagues - and put historic Swedish department in turmoil. *Nature* **2021**; 595: 15-16. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-021-01621-8>