

Empowered to speak up



Academic bullying, discrimination and harassment affect the health and careers of many academics. Voices calling on action against academic bullying are getting louder. Empowering individuals to speak up will further turn up the volume to finally reduce the gap between anti-bullying policy drafts and genuine actions.

An inappropriate comment from a colleague at a scientific conference. Impossible deadlines set by your supervisor. Being singled out in your research lab for voicing your opinion. Being discriminated for your gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Not being taken seriously because you #dontlooklikeascientist. Academic bullying, discrimination and harassment can take various forms¹, and, sadly, [many academics have experienced and/or witnessed bullying behaviour in one way or another](#), taking a toll on their [mental health and careers](#). In addition to mental and physical harm, academic bullying also has a negative effect on the progress and evolution of science itself², as innovation and creativity – key ingredients for scientific progress – require an inclusive, supportive and safe working environment.

Yet, bullying remains a systemic academic issue, and many incidents go unreported, allowing inappropriate behaviour to persist. Indeed, academic bullying thrives on silence. In particular, for early-career researchers, who are often the targets of academic bullying³, it is difficult to speak up, because the academic world is very hierarchical, hyper-competitive and pervaded with temporary contracts and projects, [providing a breeding ground for toxic dynamics](#). Careers and promotions critically depend on reference letters and support from senior colleagues, and such power imbalances create a fertile ground for abusive supervision³. Therefore, standing up to a bully is tough, particularly, if they are your supervisor or a senior colleague. Moreover, [universities and institutions often tend to take a hands-off approach in the name of academic freedom, providing only few brakes on bullying behaviour](#).

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Although it may be a long road to changing power imbalances in academia, individuals at all career stages should be empowered to speak up to break the silence that has accompanied and promoted academic bullying for too long.

So, what can you do when you experience academic bullying in your lab, at a conference or at your institution? In this issue, [Assaf Zinger](#) outlines the steps to take and tools to apply if you find yourself bullied or if you witness inappropriate behaviour. In addition to calling on office bearers, such as principal investigators and conference chairs, to providing communication channels and reporting standards to address concerns proactively, Zinger highlights the importance of peer-to-peer support to create an open dialogue and a platform, where individuals feel safe to share their experiences, voice their concerns and support one another. Moreover, Zinger proposes a scientific conference planning tool to prevent and address inappropriate behaviour at scientific meetings, which may well also be applied in research labs and at academic institutions.

However, to encourage people to speak up, we need to ensure that their voices are heard and taken seriously, and that appropriate actions are taken in response. This will require collaborative action from the academic world to establish trust in reporting mechanisms and to define a [code of conduct](#) for the independent investigation of complaints related to bullying, harassment and discrimination in the scientific workplace. Importantly, perpetrators need to be held accountable for their actions, as, otherwise, those voices will be lost in the noise of academic and institutional promises.

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