

LAW

US scientists oppose plan to weaken Title IX

The government's rewrite of a key gender-discrimination law draws more than 104,000 public comments.

BY ALEXANDRA WITZE

A controversial US government proposal to change the law that prohibits gender discrimination in education has drawn more than 104,000 public comments, including many from scientists. At issue is the future of Title IX, the 1972 statute that is the primary legal weapon for battling sexual harassment and other sexual misconduct in US academia.

Many commenters argue that changes proposed by the Department of Education last November would reduce protections for students. The public-comment period on the government's plan ended on 30 January.

"We cannot afford to weaken Title IX regulations if we care about those who experience sexual harassment and sexual violence," wrote Celia Ford, a graduate student in neuroscience at the University of California, Berkeley, in a comment on the regulations.gov website.

"We are keenly aware of the continuing prevalence of sexual harassment in the mathematical sciences," wrote Ami Radunskaya,

a mathematician at Pomona College in Claremont, California, and president of the Association for Women in Mathematics. The proposed changes, she added, "will only make the situation worse".

The education department's proposal would redefine sexual harassment from "unwelcome conduct of a sexual nature" to "unwelcome

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conduct on the basis of sex that is so severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive that it effectively denies a person equal access to the [institution's] education program or activity". It would also require accusers to appear at a live hearing and be subject to cross-examination by a representative of the person they are accusing.

Betsy DeVos, the US education secretary, has said that the changes would support the accused as well as their accusers, and would reduce the burden on universities to investigate sexual-misconduct claims. But in a joint

comment, 75 science and education groups rejected those arguments, saying that the government has ignored existing research "on the nature and extent of harm caused by sexual harassment" in education.

Ford worries that a university might decide that a faculty member acting inappropriately to junior colleagues at a work function does not constitute "severe, pervasive, and objectively offensive" behaviour. She also worries that the changes will disproportionately harm groups who are already marginalized at many institutions, such as people of colour or members of sexual and gender minorities (LGBT+).

A study released last June by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine showed that sexual harassment is pervasive in academia and damages research integrity. "I know many students and trainees who have left a department, major or field of study due to harassment," wrote Carol Ward, a biological anthropologist at the University of Missouri in Columbia, in a comment on the Title IX proposal. "Ignoring or discouraging reporting and shaming victims is perpetuating the problem, not solving it."

DeVos and the Department of Education are not required to change the proposed rules on the basis of the public comments they receive.

"I firmly believe this will have a chilling effect on reporting and will also cause a lot of confusion," says Jill Dunlap, director of research and practice at the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators in Washington DC. "We're undoing many years of good work in terms of trying to get students to trust in the process." ■

SPACE

Turkey's first space agency raises hopes

But many details are still to come on the agency established by a presidential order.

BY ÇAĞRI MERT BAKIRCI-TAYLOR

Turkey has its eyes on the stars. In a move welcomed by scientists, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has signed an executive order to form the country's first official space agency. Scientists hope the agency will provide jobs and reduce 'brain drain', even as they wonder about the feasibility of its ambitious goals.

The agency is expected to develop technologies for rocket launches and space exploration, as well as to coordinate the work of the country's other space-research centres, according to the order, signed on 13 December. It's not yet

clear how much of the national budget will be allocated to the new organization, or when it will be up and running.

"The judicial details of the agency are still being sorted out," said Mustafa Varank, the minister of industry and technology, in a speech at the National Space Workshop held in Gebze, Turkey, on 19 January. He added that this is a historic moment for a country whose flag bears the Moon and a star.

Erdoğan's ruling party has mooted the idea of establishing a space agency several times since it came into office in 2002–03. But it remained a vague and recurring campaign promise until

2016, when it was first officially included in the government's action plan. The executive order — a new power that Erdoğan gained after elections in 2018 — now makes it official.

The Turkish government already funds several space-research centres, two of which will now see their funding cut as money is redirected to the new agency. The Space Technologies Research Institute of Turkey (TÜBİTAK-UZAY) and the Directorate General of Civil Aviation, a public body that regulates civil aerospace, will both see 20% of their budgets redirected. On the basis of their official 2019 budgets, this amount alone