

Research misconduct linked to bullying: EMCRs

By EMCR Forum Executive Committee

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Research misconduct and workplace bullying need to be recognised as interconnected issues of integrity that require an integrated solution according to the Early- and Mid-Career Researcher (EMCR) Forum.

The Forum, which represents EMCRs from across Australia, has made a landmark statement asserting that current academic culture presents obstacles to research integrity.

“The reliance on easy to measure metrics, such as numbers of papers and grants, to judge a researcher’s value has produced a vicious 'publish or perish' cycle. This environment incentivises the exaggeration of results to secure funding and undermines the peer review process for both papers and grants. The current environment also de-emphasises the value of leadership and managerial capabilities of senior researchers who have the responsibility to supervise students and EMCRs. It is this imbalance in values translating into selection criteria, that can cause universities to struggle with professional integrity,” the statement says.

“Institutions employ high-profile researchers because they bring in significant research funding, produce highly cited papers and improve the institution’s standing in various rankings. Therefore, it is a reputational risk if high-profile researchers are implicated in research misconduct. The problem is exacerbated when university executives feel conflicted about letting go of academic 'stars' whose presence is endangering workplace safety or professional integrity. The fallout surrounding Mark Smyth is a prime example. For these same reasons, it takes a lot before 'stars' are removed for harassment or bullying and usually several junior whistleblowers are pushed out before any action is taken.”

“The cultural problems that these incentives have produced are systematic and feed issues of bullying and harassment. Junior researchers (EMCRs) have less power, are often in precarious employment and are dependent on the goodwill of their supervisors for career progression. There is some research supporting the connection between precarious employment and workplace bullying (1). They may be given unrealistic workloads by their supervisors then burned out and pushed out, such as this example from the [USA Office of Research Integrity casebook](#). An example of research misconduct and bullying from our membership includes a lab head denying a junior researcher authorship on their student’s paper despite the junior researcher being the main academic to advise and guide the student’s work.”

“In a small country like Australia, falling afoul of a more prominent researcher in one’s field can spell the end of a research career.”

“Proactive solutions like the establishment of an external, independent oversight body, such as an office of research integrity, are needed to change the prevailing culture.”

At present, it is the responsibility of individual institutions to investigate allegations of research misconduct. This self-regulation risks breeding potential conflicts of interest. Self-regulation relies on

individual institutions having appropriate and effective whistleblower policies and fearless staff to implement them in the face of potential liabilities.

Procedures to report bullying and other forms of misconduct are often not set up for victims to report their concerns safely. Some are too scared of the repercussions, so do not report, including our member above. Reported cases may be investigated, but in the experience of our members, there is often a lack of willpower or ability to internally implement research misconduct and harassment policies. Protracted internal investigations negatively impact innocent parties and whistleblowers, reinforcing a hesitance to report misconduct arising from environments that do not adequately safeguard whistleblowers.

It is encouraging to see that the EMCR Forum is not alone in calling for cultural change. The Chief Scientist of Australia's paper [on Trust in Science](#), makes the point that "Research integrity is behaviour-based and requires adherence to the ethical principles and professional standards essential for the responsible conduct of research." The [Pathway to Diversity in STEM Review draft recommendations](#) state "STEM-employing organisations and funding bodies should recognise all forms of bullying, harassment and discrimination as scientific and academic misconduct."

An external, independent oversight body, such as an office of research integrity, could be the primary point of investigation when serious issues are unaddressed or unresolved. In theory, this should increase unbiased, objective investigations and decrease the burden of investigations on individual institutions. However, overreliance on investigations that happen after the fact would continue to fail the most vulnerable people in the system. Therefore, we recommend that the responsibilities of an oversight body extend beyond singular investigations, encompassing a proactive assessment of institutional policies and the monitoring and management of past incidents of research misconduct, bullying and harassment. This body could actively encourage the improvement of policies, procedures and, importantly implementation through a merit system that ranks institutions according to their performance.

The introduction of an external watchdog to govern research integrity can improve the protection of vulnerable workers including EMCRs by:

- 1) Providing a confidential, safe way to report research misconduct;
- 2) Increasing the likelihood of serious issues being investigated in a timely manner;
- 3) Circumventing organisational bias towards protection of senior, renowned scientists and ensuring that the entire research team is investigated rather than focussing on less powerful junior or mid-level researchers;
- 4) Offering standardised directions regarding the accountability and obligations of both researchers and institutions.

However, an independent oversight body is not the single solution in our view. The EMCR Forum recognises the need for a proactive solution and proposes the following multi-pronged approach to tackle research misconduct and bullying:

1. Prevention:

- (a) Universities, research institutions, and science agencies should create an internal culture of respect and demonstrate zero tolerance towards any form of bullying or intimidation;
- (b) Research integrity and harassment training should not be unmemorable tick and flick online courses. This training should be conducted at regular intervals for everybody, including senior researchers and administrative staff;

- (c) Concentration of power should be tempered by establishing external reporting systems to capture minor breaches and borderline behaviour that may otherwise escalate over time;
- (d) Institutions should be empowered to replace individuals in positions of power without financial loss when moral clauses are violated;
- (e) Funding bodies should take a stronger stance on bullying and research misconduct. Evidence of bullying and violations of research integrity should be grounds for termination of grants and be considered when assessing funding.

2. Protection of victims:

- (a) Swiftly address complaints with due diligence;
- (b) Institute a positive duty of care (as was instituted for sexual harassment in Dec 2022) to safeguard mental well-being and prevent victim discrediting;
- (c) Remove conflicts of interest in handling misconduct and bullying allegations by engaging an independent, adequately staffed, external watchdog that prioritises the uncovering of truths.

3. Monitoring and reporting for accountability and continuous quality improvement:

- (a) Start annual data collection that measures organisational preparedness and ability to deal with workplace safety issues, including bullying. Make this mandatory for universities and research institutes that receive public funding;
- (b) Make data collection anonymous to protect individuals from harm and publicly report the key findings at a high enough level to avoid identification. Encourage participating institutions to use it to set goals for the next reporting period.

(1) Djurkovic, N. (2021). Workplace Bullying in Precarious Employment. In: D'Cruz, P., Noronha, E., Keashly, L., Tye-Williams, S. (eds) Special Topics and Particular Occupations, Professions and Sectors. Handbooks of Workplace Bullying, Emotional Abuse and Harassment, vol 4. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-5308-5_5

Australia's Early- and Mid-Career Researcher Forum is the national voice of Australia's emerging scientists, representing researchers who are up to 15 years post-PhD (or equivalent research higher degree), discounting career interruptions.