

## Power and bullying in research

Eric Lander, director of the Office of Science and Technology Policy and science adviser to US President Joe Biden, resigned on Feb 7, after an internal review found that he had bullied staff members. The investigation was concluded weeks before but only came to light following reporting by *Politico*. This event is emblematic of research's failure to rein in workplace bullying and of a research culture that remains in thrall to big names and bigger egos.

Fiona Watt, head of the UK's Medical Research Council, has apologised following allegations of bullying and an internal investigation. Alice Gast, president of Imperial College London, has also recently apologised for bullying. An Imperial investigation found that Gast "exercised her position in such a way as to undermine [staff] both personally and professionally". The "problem of power being centred in two or three individuals" cited in Imperial's report offers insight into the structural issues at play in all three of these cases.

Wellcome's 2020 report, *What Researchers Think About The Culture They Work In* lays out the perspective of scientists subject to the behaviour of powerful senior staff. It found that 61% of researchers witnessed bullying or harassment, but only 37% felt comfortable speaking up. 75% of researchers felt that creativity had been stifled by research culture, with 43% believing that their workplace puts more value on metrics and output than research quality. Institutions also seem to struggle to establish an agreed definition of bullying and harassment, and differing thresholds can lead to reports never being made. It is clear that there is something very wrong with workplace culture in research.

The traditional research workplace—where a rigid hierarchy and the guru-acolyte model of leadership has dominated—is now outdated. Power is concentrated in the hands of so few people, often men, protected and promoted by patronage. It can be wielded indiscriminately against early career researchers, destroying the open and collaborative culture that produces good science. The instability of the postdoctoral career, littered with temporary contracts, woeful hourly rates, and the pressure to publish or perish, results in workplace conditions that can cause mental stress and physical burnout. Such conditions are likely to drive talented individuals out of research, as well

as incentivising data massaging and manipulation, and stand in contrast to the remuneration and job security of those who lead research teams.

Bullying also intersects with bias and discrimination, and hampers the inclusion of diverse viewpoints. The latest *Nature* jobs survey found that women in research were twice as likely to report mistreatment than women in industry jobs, and that one in six reported gender discrimination in the workplace. Respondents in the UK who did not identify as white reported experiencing discrimination, bullying, or harassment at twice the rate of their white colleagues. The result will be exclusion and the stifling of ideas and diverse perspectives that fuel research innovation, discovery, and application.

The distribution of grants contributes to the competitive culture of research and often supports unequal power structures. The way that superstar scientists are heavily associated with breakthrough research does not reflect the teams that underpin all the difficult and arduous labour, but the funding and grants that result from having high-profile names publishing cutting edge research means institutions are incentivised to preserve their most lucrative employees.

Research doesn't have to be structured like this. Wellcome's report states that a positive research culture is diverse, collaborative, and transparent, where individuals and their contributions feel supported and valuable, and creativity is given space to flourish. Simple solutions put forward include anonymous grant submissions, specific funding to provide security and support for early career researchers, rethinking funding criteria to reward good research culture and ethics, and drawing on best practice from other industries.

In the short term, reporting mechanisms must be standardised, whistleblowers fully protected, and the results of independent investigations into bullying include accountability mechanisms to ensure transparency and action. Institutional leaders must speak out about the culture of their organisations. On the first day Biden took power, he said anyone who was disrespectful would be fired "on the spot". His White House failed to live up to this standard, and scientific progress is being damaged by protecting the powerful from the consequences of their actions.

■ *The Lancet*



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For more on the **Eric Lander White House investigation** see <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/02/07/eric-lander-white-house-investigation-00006077>

For more on **Imperial College London's Independent Investigation Report 2020** see <https://www.imperial.ac.uk/media/imperial-college/about/public/ICO-disclosure-for-publication.pdf>

For **Wellcome's report** see <https://wellcome.org/reports/what-researchers-think-about-research-culture>

For more on the **Nature jobs survey: Discrimination still plagues science** see <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-03043-y>