

CONTEXT

Introduction

Workplace bullying is a pervasive problem. As long as organisations are filled with people, bullying, or the potential for it, is present. Yet it has been, to a large extent, a taboo subject in organisational life (1). The last decade has seen an emerging academic and policy interest in the topic, with work from Scandinavian countries and Germany leading out. While it can be argued that this concern in the public domain has been driven by the self-interests of the legal profession and of media and training consultants (2), it is also true that perceptions of rights and responsibilities have shifted in relation to employer behaviour. Whereas in the past employers may have been able to hide behind notions of ‘no-nonsense management’ or claim that they did not know about the health effects of bullying, it is increasingly recognised that bullying is unethical and oppressive and employees have a right not to be exposed to it (3).

Definitions and Measurement

The term ‘bullying’ used predominantly in Ireland, UK and Australia, is not internationally agreed upon, Scandinavian countries favouring the term ‘mobbing’ and the US preferring employee or emotional abuse. The phenomenon has been defined in many ways and there is no agreed definition of bullying. Despite variation, key components emerge in most definitions.

Frequency and duration

It is generally agreed that bullying involves repeated, persistent negative actions over time. Most definitions submit a time requirement of six months (4).

Intent of perpetrator

Simply listing negative ‘bullying’ actions may not be a useful way to define or measure bullying. Negative actions may appear to be minor, but as they accumulate over time the

person on the receiving end may feel threatened or undermined. The ‘actions’ in and of themselves cannot be viewed out of context and the perceived intent of the perpetrator must be taken into consideration. The actions may be insidious and the perpetrator cunning, resorting to deep levels of deviousness in their attempts to intimidate or humiliate. Usually once-off incidents do not qualify as bullying but the possibility that an apparently once-off incident may be the breaking point after a series of subtle incivilities must be considered (4). Including the intent of the perpetrator in defining bullying includes both conflict-escalation bullying and predatory bullying.

Power imbalance

Most definitions refer to a power imbalance (4, 5). The bully has a degree of power over the person being bullied, and seeks to abuse this, to the extent that the person being bullied ‘has difficulty in defending themselves’ (5). Importantly, power can be either physical, psychological or social/organisational.

It is acknowledged that the issue of subjectivity is important in identifying and measuring workplace bullying (4, 5, 6). A person who claims to have been bullied in the workplace has to perceive that bullying took place and that it has had a negative effect. What one person may consider bullying, another may not. Further, assessing the intent of the perpetrator is in the first instance, a subjective task. From a research perspective, concerns have been articulated about the reliability and validity of the self-reports of persons alleging bullying. Some attempts have made to assess the accuracy or stability of accounts of bullying over time (5, 6). Although these studies are somewhat limited in scope, they do indicate that accounts are more stable than not. While objective measures, such as checklists of bullying behaviours have been advocated, it is also apparent that they too have limitations and are blunt instruments for measuring very subtle and complex aspects of human interactions. Yet, clearly, it has to be demonstrated that agreed criteria of acceptable behaviour were breached (7). Ultimately, for both practical and research purposes, assessment of bullying has to appropriately include both subjective and objective elements.

Prevalence

Much of the literature on workplace bullying has concerned itself with measuring prevalence, both nationally and within sectors. Various prevalence rates are reported, for example 2 - 4% in Denmark (8), 3.5% in Sweden (9), 7% in Ireland (4), 8.6% in Norway (10) 10% on Finland, (11) and 10.6% in the UK (12). It is tempting to explain the lack of uniformity in prevalence as a function of different national and organisational cultures, for example differences in power-distance (5), however much of the variation may be accounted for methodologically. There are variations for example in the way in which and the extent to which bullying is defined, some studies choosing not to define the term. Surveys give different time and frequency response options, may offer either a global question on whether bullied/not bullied or a standardised questionnaire such as the Negative Acts Questionnaire (1,12). Questionnaire and single items have been shown to yield different prevalence rates (13) . There is variation in sampling frames, ranging from randomly selected workers across sectors, selected organisations or sectors, or trade union membership. Finally response rates vary from 25% to 65%.

Outcomes

The negative effects of self-reported bullying are well documented. They include physical effects such as sleep disturbance and stomach problems, (4, 14) and adverse scores on the General Health Questionnaire (15), psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, or stress (5, 8) and social effects such as deteriorating relationships within the family (14). Negative organisational outcomes have also been recorded such as compensation costs and loss of productivity due to increased absenteeism, transfers and quitting.

Approaches to Understanding Workplace Bullying

Approaches to understanding bullying in the workplace include those, which focus on the individual, on social processes, or on the organisation.

The individual models focus on the personality traits of bullies and victims, positing that certain people have personality traits that are foster bullying behaviour and certain people have an array of traits that make them easy targets for scapegoating and ridicule. This approach is not unlike that which characterises much of the school bullying literature. It has been shown to have limited usefulness in the workplace context (5), not the least because of difficulties determining whether traits like low self-esteem are an antecedent or a consequence of bullying.

Einarsen identifies a second approach, which assumes that conflict and scapegoating, or the displacement of aggression, is inherent to any work organisation (1, 5). If the process extends over long periods of time with one person as its target or if long term unresolved conflict escalates, specific bullying incidents between individuals may result.

A model that has received more public and research attention is the work-environment model. This model offers organisational factors and work conditions such as conflicting goals and priorities, high task and responsibility ambiguity, poor information flow, and lack of consultation as an explanatory device. According to Leyman, a proponent of this approach, who becomes a target in such a negative work environment is simply coincidence (5). There is considerable empirical support for the association between reported incidences of bullying and negative work environments (e.g. 4, 11, 12, 14, 16). Further, there is a relationship between organisational change and bullying, with several studies demonstrating that bullying coincided with changes of either ownership or management or the introduction of new technology (e.g. 4, 12, 14). It would seem however that Leymann's position that personal factors are of no significance is unfounded. Organisational and situational variables are likely to be interacting with personal variables (5).

The attribution of wider organisational factors such as climate and culture as a cause of bullying is a related model, also with some empirical support. There is evidence for example that bullying is more commonly reported in large organisations, public sector organisations and male-dominated organisations (4, 11, 17). Organisational culture can act as a 'filter' through which behaviours are variously interpreted (1). Shouting and

name-calling may be unequivocally unacceptable in a white collar or professional work setting but far more tolerated in the construction industry, for example. Cultural factors may influence any or all of the following; what is perceived as bullying, what degree of seriousness it is afforded, how bullying is investigated and what actions are taken.

Finally, there is what can be termed a systemic approach in which the organisation itself is seen to be the bully. Negative work conditions are in and of themselves seen to be a harassment, as opposed to prompting or eliciting aggressive behaviour. Liefoghe and Davey explore this idea in more depth, finding evidence for concerns with organisational power systems and institutional bullying (18).

It may not be useful to view these models as competing with one another (1) as in fact the aetiology of bullying may be somewhat different for different types of bullying. Organisational culture and climate are likely to be key variables in explaining predatory bullying, whereas increased environmental stress may be more relevant to conflict-escalation bullying.

This Study

In Ireland, concerns about workplace bullying have led to the publication, by the Health and Safety Authority, of the Report of the Task Force on the Prevention of Workplace Bullying (2001). While there is no specific legislation on the topic, four statutes have a bearing on workplace bullying (4) and under one of these, the Health and Welfare at Work Act (1989), a code of practice has been drawn up and although not legally binding, its terms are admissible in evidence against employers (3).

While a university workplace might be thought to be less likely than other workplaces to experience bullying or harassment, due to its 'collegial form of governance and its commitment to the pursuit of knowledge' (19), this is not the case. In studies where bullying in teaching or education has been measured, it is higher than the national rate. Hoel and Cooper found a 15.5% rate that bullying in teaching posts, compared to 10.6% nationally (15). Bjorkqvist found that 24% of female and 17% of male employees of a

Finnish University experienced bullying (20), which compares unfavourably with their national estimate of 10% (11). The Task Force survey in Ireland found that rate for the education sector was 12%, topped only by one other of 12 sectors, and considerably higher than the national figure of 7% (4). These elevated levels of bullying may well be explained by higher levels of reporting or articulacy in education but may also reflect real differences in exposure.

NUI Galway commissioned external occupational psychologist to undertake a research study designed to examine perceptions of equal opportunities and managing diversity in the University. This study found that 66% of staff respondents perceived that there was bullying within the organisation, of which only 31% had complained about, and of these, more than three quarters were not satisfied with how their case was handled (21). While the finding is not comparable with other studies exploring prevalence, it is clear that the issue need to be addressed in NUI Galway.

It is recommended that in order to tackle bullying, organisations formulate an Anti-Bullying policy that suit their particular requirements (3,4). NUI Galway developed an Anti-Bullying Policy in 2001. However a policy will be of little use if employees are not aware of it, or willing to use it. This project ¹ therefore had two key objectives;

- To measure levels of awareness of current policy and practice in NUI Galway to workplace bullying.
- To explore staff ideas and suggestions for tackling workplace bullying.

¹ Funded by NUI Galway Millenium Fund (7,00 euro)

METHOD

Using the June payroll, with the cooperation of the HR department a questionnaire was sent to all staff. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail to all academic, administrative and library staff, and by internal post to all technical and operative staff.

The instrument included questions about

- social and health difficulties as a consequence of bullying
- perceptions of bullying behaviours
- knowledge of the NUI Galway Anti-Bullying policy and procedures,
- potential barriers to reporting bullying behaviour,
- the University setting and bullying
- how bullying behaviour should be tackled

Most questions had fixed choices response options with some inviting additional open-ended comments. Focus group discussions were also scheduled (2 for each staff group) and staff were invited to attend.

Results for the quantitative component were analysed using the SPSS programme². A content analysis was undertaken with the qualitative data.

² The work of research assistant, Jutta Greve in data collection and entry is acknowledged.

FINDINGS

The survey was sent to 1,498 staff members at NUI Galway on the June payroll. There was an insufficient response to focus groups, such that no meaningful analysis of focus group data could take place. Survey questionnaires were returned by 298 persons, yielding an over all response rate of 20%. Response rates were highest for academic and technical staff, and lowest for administrative and library staff (see Table 1). Female respondents were in the majority (61.8%), as were those aged between 25 and 45 (71%).

Table 1: Response Rates

Staff group	Population	Response	Response Rate
Academic	763	176	23%
Administration/library	528	61	11.5%
Technical/Operative	214	43	20%
Total	1,495	293	20%

Table 2 Age and Gender NUI Galway

Frequency	Age					Group			Gender	
	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	Acdmc	Admin./library	Tech/Op	Female	Male
Number	20	119	90	37	18	176	61	43	181	105
Per cent	6.8%	40.6%	30.7%	13%	6.1%	60.1%	20.8%	14.7%	61.8%	35.8%

All respondents were presented with a checklist of negative behaviours ³, and asked to indicate whether they considered each to be definitely, possibly, or not an example of a bullying behaviour. The majority of respondents perceived most of these behaviours to

³ Based on the Work Harassment Scale, Bjorkqvist, K., Osterman, K., and Hjelt-Back, M. (1992b) The Work Harassment Scale, Vas Finland, Abo Akademi University.

definitely constitute bullying. Very few perceived any of the behaviours not to be bullying behaviours. Results can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3: Perceptions about bullying behaviours

Item	Definitely	Possibly	Not	
	NUIG	NUIG	NUIG	
Exposure to direct threats	94%	2%	4%	
Sensitive details about your private life used as pressure	92%	3%	4%	
Exposure to insulting comments about your private life	87%	8%	4%	
Ridiculed in front of others	85%	11%	4%	
Malicious rumours spread about you behind your back	80%	15%	5%	
Being shouted at loudly	78%	16%	5%	
Exposure to accusations of being mentally retarded	74%	20%	5%	
Sneered at	71%	26%	4%	
Lies about you told by others	71%	24%	5%	
Treated as non-existent	71%	24%	5%	
Your work is judged in an incorrect and insulting manner	68%	28%	4%	
Unduly criticised	67%	27%	5%	
Belittling of your opinions	59%	35%	5%	
Given insulting tasks	58%	34%	7%	
Exposure to insinulative glances and negative gestures	58%	36%	9%	
Refusal speak to you	56%	36%	7%	
Refusal to hear you	55%	40%	6%	
Exposure to accusations	55%	39%	6%	
Isolated	46%	46%	7%	
Unduly disrupted	35%	52%	12%	
Unduly reduced opportunities to express yourself	32%	58%	9%	
Your sense of judgement questioned	21%	62%	17%	
Given meaningless tasks	28%	57%	15%	

Respondents were presented with a list of social and health difficulties and asked to agree or disagree whether these would be a likely consequence of bullying. As can be seen from Table 4, there were high levels of agreement for most items.

Table 4: Perceived consequences of bullying

	Agree	Disagree	N/a
Sleep Problems	93.5%	3.8%	2.7%
Irritability	89.4%	7.5%	3.1%
Apathy	82.3%	13%	4.8%
Difficulty concentrating	91.1%	6.8%	2%
Losing friends	60.4%	35.2%	4.4%
Stress related illness	95.9%	2.4%	1.7%
Depression	95.2%	2.4%	2.4%
Compulsive behaviour	56.3%	37.5%	6.1%
Helplessness	87.4%	8.9%	3.8%
Anger	91.8%	5.5%	2.7%
Anxiety and despair	96.2%	1.7%	2%

Both groups were asked whether they knew if their organisation had an Anti-Bullying Policy and if they had seen it. Over three-quarters of respondents said yes to the first question, although two thirds of respondents had not actually seen it (see Table 5). There was a significant difference between staff groups in response to these questions, with academic staff being least likely to say yes, NUI Galway has an Anti-Bullying Policy and most likely not to answer the question (Chi = 15.9, df = 6, p = .01), and Academic staff also being significantly more likely to say they have not seen the Policy (Chi = 24.5, df = 6, p = 0).

Table 5: Awareness of Anti-Bullying policy

	<i>Has NUIG/UCHG an Anti-Bullying Policy</i>			<i>Have you ever seen it ?</i>		
	Yes	No	Don't know	Yes	No	Don't know
NUIG	(226) 77%	(40) 14%	(27) 9%	(105) 36%	(180) 61%	(8) 3%

Respondents were asked what they thought should be done to resolve a bullying problem both informally, and formally. Two thirds of respondents (195; 66.5%) detailed what they thought should be done informally. The majority of respondents favoured approaching the person directly. Relatively few suggested seeking advice from colleagues or the HR Department. Very few suggested a record be kept of incidents (see Table 6). A similar proportion detailed how they thought one should resolve bullying formally (200; 68%). Responses were more varied to this question, with just over half suggesting reporting the incident, although only one third stated explicitly that a complaint should be made in writing. A little over one third suggested going to the HR Department. Again relatively few said a record should be kept of incidents (see Table 6).

Table 6: Resolving a Bullying problem

<i>Resolving a problem informally</i>		<i>Resolving a problem formally</i>	
Proportion who said....		Proportion who said.....	
Approach person first	70%	Inform section head	57.5%
Report to senior/line manager	21%	Inform HR Dept.	36%
Seek advice from colleagues	18%	Make a complaint in writing	30%
Use a 3 rd party to communicate	13%	Refer to Anti-Bullying policy	11.5%
Keep a record of events/document	6%	Keep a record of events/document	10.5%
Bully back	1%	Go to Trade union	10.5%
		Go to Equality Officer	2.5%
		Involve a 3 rd party	6%

Respondents were asked whether they thought there were barriers to responding to bullying, as to whether the NUI Galway Anti-Bullying Policy was user-friendly or not, and whether there was anything about the University setting that might provoke bullying. The majority of staff did see barriers to responding to bullying, although most were unsure about whether the policies were user friendly. Almost half thought the University setting had features that actually provoke bullying (see Table 7). There were no significant differences between staff groupings on either question about barriers, although there were differences on questions about the user-friendly nature of the policy and the university setting. Administrative and technical staff were more likely to say that the policy is user friendly than Academic staff (Chi = 27.3, df = 6, p = 0), and Administrative staff were less likely than technical and academic staff to say that there is something about the University setting that provokes bullying (Chi = 22.7, df = 6, p = 0).

Table 7: Perceptions about the Anti-Bullying Policy

	Yes	No	Don't know/No answer
Barriers to making an informal response to bullying	(217) 74%	(62) 21%	(14) 5%
Barriers to making a formal response to bullying	(203) 69%	(61) 21%	(29) 10%
Are NUIG Anti-Bullying policies user-friendly	(31) 11%	(52) 18%	(210) 72%
Anything about University setting that might provoke Bullying	(143) 49%	(48) 16%	(102) 34%

Respondents supplied comments as part of their response to questions about;

- perceived barriers to responding, either formally or informally, to bullying,
- whether NUI Galway's anti-bullying policies are user-friendly or not
- suggestions for tackling the problems
- the University setting and bullying

In total, 1,040 comments were offered. There was, among this 20% of NUI Galway staff, a great willingness to comment on these matters and to give their views. There is a sense that those who responded have given thought to this matter and made a considered response. Broadly speaking, about half of the comments offered were of a factual or functional nature, detailing respondents knowledge of anti-bullying procedures, or pragmatic suggestions for increasing dissemination of information. About half of the comments were reflective or analytical, commenting on the current policy, procedures and the organisational culture in NUI Galway, as it relates to workplace bullying.

Responses were analysed using the following framework

- The NUI Galway anti-bullying policy and procedures
- The University work environment and workplace bullying

The NUI Galway Anti-Bullying Policy and procedures

Consistent with the finding that two thirds of the respondents although aware of an Anti-Bullying Policy, has not actually seen or read it, there was a very strong perception that more work needs to be done in the promotion of the Anti-Bullying Policy. Responses referred to being completely unaware or unfamiliar with the policy, not knowing where to find it, and difficulty in locating it. One respondent said for example

“ I am here a year and no one has spoken to me, no induction from the college, no knowledge of the policy...”

It was thought that the policy should be more accessible. It was pointed out that placing the policy on the HR web page was inadequate as a means of informing people. Many suggestions were made to improve accessibility. Proactively sending information to employees, via circulars or booklets was suggested. Definitions of bullying, examples of behaviours that constitute bullying, legislation, and explicit information on whom to contact and how to proceed with a complaint were suggested as elements in such documentation. It was also suggested that the topic should be covered in staff induction sessions and that

“ A poster on dealing with the workplace bully...should be placed in a prominent position in each work area”

The Anti-Bullying Policy offered two ways of resolving bullying problems, an informal route and a formal grievance procedure, involving a written complaint to the Director of Human Resources. Overall, these procedures were viewed critically by respondents. The general tenor of comments was negative, in some cases bordering on cynical.

In relation to the informal route some expressed confidence in this -

“Approach the person responsible for bullying and explain how behavior falls under 'bullying', that it is unacceptable and offer examples of more appropriate ways of expressing views”

“Speak quietly and calmly to the person who is bullying you, explain how you feel and come to some understanding”

Some comments were qualified, for example *“Speak with the person who is bullying if the form is not too extreme. If impossible or if it doesn't work, speak with supervisor”*.

The need for courage in tackling the perpetrator and the fact that it is a high-risk strategy was recognised. Many suggested that the bully, when approached could “*use this as ammunition against you*”, and that the situation could deteriorate through retaliation and escalated bullying.

Most comments however were critical and even scathing of the informal route, acknowledging that fear and intimidation made it very difficult, even impossible for the person bullied to take action. Fear was frequently mentioned. In addition to fear of further exposure to bullying, fears of being isolated, not believed, labeled as a troublemaker or perceived as weak were articulated. The centrality of intimidation to the bullying dynamic was clearly recognised, as the informal route was described as unhelpful, difficult to enact, and ‘*virtually useless*’.

“If you mention the word bullying in any informal attempt to confront the issue, the “bully” is likely to immediately threaten that he/she will contact their solicitor to protect them from any further discussion on the issue and will insist that they wish their solicitor to be present in any future discussion. This response often ends the informal approach”

“ Bullies, by definition, would be resistant to an informal approach”

And even more cynically –

“ In my experience speaking to the bully directly yourself only amuses the bully and provides the bully with the gloating assurance that he/she is succeeding”

In relation to the formal route, as well as requests to publicise the procedure more effectively, there was a strong sense the procedure does not inspire confidence.

“ At times policies and procedures are not consistently followed to address bullying situations. Indeed those on the receiving end of this behaviour are often left with the feeling that they are to blame”

“At present there is a farce of a procedure to follow...”

Some concerns were expressed about approachability and transparency. Perceived lack of confidentiality particularly, was an issue. Procedures were described as *‘excessively bureaucratic and unwieldy’*. There was a perception that the process is slow, which is unnecessarily stressful for the person taking the case.

“You have to go through so many channels and even at the end of all of that there is no follow up”.

In a related vein, it was observed that for an allegation to be proved there must be evidence. Evidence can be difficult to obtain since bullies may typically act where there are no witnesses, or there is only one target, or others are required to come forward to validate incidents and may, due to fear and intimidation, not come forward. As one respondent put it – *‘it’s the victim’s word against the perpetrator’*. Where the perpetrator is more senior, and/or has already damaged the credibility of the person bullied, it is easy to see why many do not want to raise the issue formally.

Finally, the mental state of the victim was seen to impede them in addressing the issue. Those who are experiencing bullying were described as vulnerable, violated, low in self-esteem and insecure. This was generally seen to be a consequence of bullying, rather than an antecedent.

“Too much damage can be done to an individual before he or she musters the courage to do anything about the problem – there is an element of fear, which the policy doesn’t ease”

“Workplace bullying leaves you feeling incompetent and as if the criticisms are justified”.

“The bullying may have shredded your self confidence so you may not have the strength to formally complain about the bully”.

It was suggested that in the future cases be dealt with efficiently and in an ‘appropriate and urgent’ manner –

“ Not to be dragged out over a period of time. If this happens it makes a mockery of Anti-Bullying procedure – and of the workforce.”

The creation of an Ombudsman type of appointment was suggested by one respondent, and many others highlighted, similarly, the need for an independent party or workplace mediators, employed specifically for this purpose.

Specific suggestions included a confidential helpline, a register of complaints, an Anti-Bullying Day to highlight procedures and issues, a proactive survey per semester to identify cases, an FAQ document e mailed to staff in a similar to the Parenting Programme and ensuring that the list of ‘contact persons’ includes staff from all sectors.

Workshops and training sessions were identified as ways of heightening awareness of bullying issues generally and in-house procedures. Interestingly, almost half of those who suggested staff training stated that it should be compulsory to attend, which would represent quite a radical departure from current practice.

The University work environment and workplace bullying

It can be argued that bullying will always be present not just in NUI Galway, but in any work environment. Wherever you have people, and some have power over others, you at least have the potential for bullying behaviour. As one respondent stated – “*Its like a cancer, always there and never eradicated*”.

Yet, bullying can be more likely to flourish in certain types of work environments, and within certain organisations. Respondents offered many detailed and insightful comments on the way in which workplace environments generally and the University work environment provides fertile conditions for bullying behaviours.

General Organisational Factors

Factors that could be said to be a function of the type of organisation included the bureaucratic and hierarchical structure, the stable workforce, and the semi-state aspect.

It was perceived that the University is clearly a hierarchy and in a hierarchical organisation, bullying is highly likely, even inevitable. Lots of layers of staff, different categories of staff, all combine to create a situation in which there a lot of people jostling within the pecking order.

“There is a very definite hierarchy in place, a definite pecking order. Many people are very political, and there is a political game being played. It's a natural habitat for bullying behaviour to be established, and condoned.”

The way in which power structures in a heirarchichcal organisation mitigate against anti-bullying procedures, was clearly recognised by staff. Respondents seemed in no doubt that alleging or formally reporting bullying was highly likely to make one's situation worse. This eventuality was described variously, for example, the terms reprisals, revenge behaviours, repercussions, further attacks, being hit back, retaliation, retribution, and backlash were all used. It was thought that a complaint of bullying

would be used against a staff member who applied for a promotion, or if temporary, they could *'face a situation where their contract is not renewed'*.

"People who are on contract are very vulnerable. You are much less likely to speak out about health and safety issues and even if you raise them it is very difficult to pursue changes if your line manager/supervisor/HoD isn't interested"

"A formal complaint will be used against you at some stage when you go up for promotion"

"Shut up and Put up" was the terse advice of one respondent.

Some respondents identified the fact that the organisation is semi-state and has a very stable workforce as factors that contribute to bullying. It was pointed out that there are many staff members who have been in the organisation for many years, which combined with little movement of staff across units, creates problems. For example;

'...long serving staff members may feel they can get away with this kind of behaviour'

Additional problems caused by the stability of the workforce were unwillingness to adapt to change or be open to new ideas from new staff, and the fact that people who don't like each other having to work with one another for many years. The relative 'safety' of staff in a semi-state organisation was noted, referring to the perceived unlikeliness of dismissal. The growing levels of *"competition and pressure"* were mentioned, including competition internally for resources.

Academic Organisation Factors

Respondents were very articulate about the way in which an academic environment can be a fertile breeding ground for bullying. Specifically, the nature of academic power and the abuse of it was a very striking theme in responses. Academia was described as an elitist environment, in which a small number of *"untouchables"*, some of whom consider themselves to be *"on a par with God"*, have very substantial power.

“ Certain individuals use their level of qualification as power over others in order to make their opinions known and to suppress others’ opinions”.

Heads of Department were seen to have power over promotion and advancement for most members of their department, including contract length, working conditions, choice of external examiners for post graduate students and so on. Temporary contract staff, including postgraduates on research contracts were seen to be particularly vulnerable.

....personnel essentially delegate the management of temporary staff to department heads / research centre heads, who can essentially suit themselves, and are not audited for their behaviour”.

This flaw in the system could be overcome by allocating a mentor or advisor, separate to their formal supervisor and thus not connected in any way with the workers research. Any problems or grievances could be discussed with this person.

It was pointed out that there are very few professorial posts, and in cases where the Chair in an academic department is non-rotating, the post holder is virtually unassailable and rarely if ever called to answer for their actions. It was suggested for example that;

“Many academics seem to feel they are above the law and that if things go wrong the college will cover up for them – there are no shortage of examples to support this view”

“Progress and promotion.....is often controlled by one or two individuals who do not answer for their actions and thereby personal relationships, preferences or prejudices often dictate situations”

While most of the concerns about abuse of power were made in the context of hierarchical structures generally, there were some concerns about this in the specific

context of academia. The lack of accountability of academic staff was mentioned, and more specifically concerns were expressed that a person who alleges they are being bullied may be perceived as not being able to meet the demands of academia.

The intellectual superiority or perceived superiority of academics was seen to be the rationale for the inordinate power afforded to senior academics. It was suggested that for some, intelligence was accepted as an adequate substitute for experience. This problem was not confined to senior posts. Academia generally was seen to be characterised by an abundance of “*over-inflated egos*”, arrogance and snobbery, and in any given department administrative staff can feel outnumbered and isolated. The point was made

“It is widely perceived that academic staff seem to look down upon administration staff, whether this is actually the case or not, there seems to be a chasm between the two groups”

NUI Galway

Respondents were equally vocal about NUI Galway. Comments were offered about the general work culture that prevails in NUI Galway and how this mitigates against anti-bullying policies and procedures, and about specific features of the organisation and its structure which were clearly seen to exacerbate the potential for bullying.

The work environment was described as less regulated than other environments, for example with lack of clarity around many academic job descriptions, and little consistency across departments regarding teaching hours, leave and other obligations. It was pointed out that this can result in excessive workloads – at least for some people, for example “*the unequal distribution of work, and the absence of any mechanism to challenge members of staff who apparently acquire, over time, a customary right to do less than their fair share*”. This lack of clarity around job descriptions may be exploited thus contributing to a climate that is conducive to bullying.

“The opposition of heads of departments to equalising workloads or acknowledging disparities leads to overloading of some colleagues and unrealistic deadlines, e.g. in marking scripts, leaving those colleagues feeling exhausted and demeaned”

It was perceived that many of those in managerial positions had not had any training in management or people skills. These comments chiefly – but not exclusively – referred to academics. Several suggestions for combating bullying including training for managerial staff not just in handling complaints, but general ‘people’ skills and avoiding the use of bullying tactics. It was observed that lack of training could combine with workload difficulties to further intensify the potential for negative behaviour.

“Start training senior member of staff (professors in particular). Every year they should undergo a one day training course in communication and staff management as well as intercultural training”

“Managers of the people are invariably academics who have risen through the ranks, they are not trained to manage people and in my experience many, not all, of them have little or no people skills, and no concept of good management.”

The idea that the work culture generally in NUI Galway is one that fails to address and be proactive about bullying problems was frequently articulated. Many stated that staff are not openly encouraged to address bullying in the workplace, and that if bullying were reported they would not be listened too or not be taken seriously. Respondents suggested, for example, that *“the system in NUIG does not want to know and couldn’t care less”*, and that there is an unspoken rule not to make complaints. The present approach was thought to constitute *“lip service”*, and many cynically observed that *“in reality, nothing will change”*. These concerns, expressed quite frequently, are best summed up in following comment;

“I suspect that the university will not take them seriously and, even if they are shown to be justified, there will be foot-dragging in dealing with any allegations. Basically,

the university just does not like to confront these issues, particularly if the person against whom allegations are made has been in the university for some time”

The tendency within the University to minimise perceived damage, rather than address the substantive complaint was noted, as was the perceived unwillingness to engage in public admission that such things happen.

Relatedly, it was viewed that a major barrier to eliminating or even reducing bullying within the University there the lack of an effective deterrent. It was pointed out for example that *“there is NO effective way to punish someone in authority, nor prevent them from re-asserting their bullying behaviour”* and that they will at worst receive a verbal warning, or perhaps a conflict resolution course, and that knowing this they will quickly return to their bullying behaviour.

“...of course the Head of Dept can't be sacked, so after a slap on the wrist the Head goes back to lording it over the career of the victim. NUIG has allowed these bullies to get into these untouchable positions of power...”

Finally, and on a positive note, many suggestions for change were offered, which while implicitly critical of present culture, were also optimistic and forward-looking. It was strongly suggested for example that we have a more open, transparent, communicative culture;

“Ensure that any cases of complaints are handled well so that staff can know that this is the norm. Work in co-operation with the relevant unions to ensure that staff know that NUIG has a good working relationship around such complaints with their representative organisations”

Most particularly, the need for a ‘zero-tolerance of bullying’ culture was frequently advocated. This would essentially require being ‘up-front’ with all employees, making it abundant clear that bullying will not be tolerated under any circumstances, or as one respondent put it *“regardless of the seniority of the bully”*. A zero-tolerance of bullying

environment would also be one in which it is *“easy and safe for any employee to make a complaint”*, and would include *“procedures to safeguard against false accusations”*.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Response Rate

The response rate for this staff-wide survey was poor, at 20%. While the fact that the survey went out in July and was on a topic of a sensitive nature may in part contribute, these factors cannot account entirely for the disappointingly low response. A very similar survey conducted on the nursing staff in UCHG, also in July, yielded a response rate of 51% (22). Given that the response rate was similar to the staff response in the Equal Opportunities/Diversity Study (24%), it would appear that there is either substantial apathy and indifference, or suspicion and cynicism within the University.

The Anti-Bullying Policy

It is clear from the findings that there are low levels of awareness about the University's Anti-Bullying Policy. Almost two thirds of respondents had not read it and there was a very strong perception that more work needs to be done in making staff aware of it. Comments indicated that people were not familiar with its content and did not know where to find it. Simply having it on the web page was plainly inadequate. **The University must be more proactive in informing staff of the policy and encouraging them to familiarise themselves with it.** Specific suggestions were made, such as a regular e-mail/information update, and inclusion at induction, posters etc., which could be implemented.

Procedures

The actual procedures outlined in the policy were not, in the main, viewed positively. Many were distrustful of the 'informal approach' and the fear that if one was brave enough to challenge the perceived bully, the challenger could only expose themselves further and risk escalated harassment.

In the light of these findings, and the development of the service within the Health and Safety Authority of a Bullying Response Unit (BRU) to assist organisations develop

policies, since the policy was formulated, **it is recommended that the University seek the assistance of the BRU to revisit and if necessary revise the policy.**

Cultural Change

It is evident from the findings that an Anti-Bullying policy – although an essential ingredient in any approach – is insufficient to combat bullying. Practices and procedures that flow from policy must be seen to be efficient and effective, and serve the staff even-handedly, both those who wish to have a complaint investigated and those who are being investigated. Respondents had very little confidence in the formal grievance procedure, fearing long drawn out, stressful procedures from which one could not withdraw, lack of transparency and confidentiality. **It is recommended that the University critically examine the formal grievance procedure and explore ways of making it more responsive and transparent. It may be useful for example to consider the suggestion of an Ombudsman type of appointment.** This might permit staff to have initial discussions with an individual seen to be independent, prior to making ‘formal’ allegations. It may also permit a speedier response and thus intervention prior to matters escalating to a highly stressful level, which is often when person feeling bullied considers no other option but formal grievance procedures.

It is very apparent that respondents saw the ‘roots’ of bullying reaching far and wide into the organisation. There were virtually no comments that construed bullying incidents as specific personality clashes. Similarly, there was a notable absence of understanding bullying to be due to inherent vulnerability or over sensitivity in ‘targets’. The perceived contribution of organisational climate and culture was evident. The perception that nothing would happen or change if an individual makes a formal complaint about bullying, and the likelihood of collusion, closing of ranks, not being believed and not being taken seriously was a real concern. As part of this, it was widely perceived that there was no real deterrent for bullying, especially for senior academics or long standing members of staff. Indeed, this cynicism may well explain the poor response rate of the study. A cultural change is evidently needed. Cultural change must be instigated from the top of an organisation. For change to succeed, the senior staff

must provide vision and leadership, demonstrating commitment to change by their own behaviour and attitudes (23). **It is recommended that the University adopt a ‘zero-tolerance of bullying’ position, being up-front with all employees, making it abundantly clear that bullying will not be tolerated under any circumstances.** It was interesting to note that all comments in the qualitative data set referred to bullying within staff. There was no mention whatsoever of bullying of students or by students. Adopting a zero-tolerance stance would however, encompass bullying at all levels, and for all persons.

Change in work practices

While hierarchical structures and stability are features of an organisation that cannot, and arguably should not be changed, it was clear that certain work practices were seen to contribute to bullying, and could therefore usefully be reviewed. In particular, the lack of clear guidelines and expectations for Heads of Department, creates a situation in which those in these positions have or appear to have substantial power. This creates difficulties both for the institution in terms of recourse if the head is alleged to have abused power and for the holder of the post in terms of juggling workloads and demands on the Department, and in terms of back-up and support. Further, it has to be recognised that intellectual excellence, no doubt the primary criterion for appointment to head of department, cannot be assumed to embody knowledge of and experience in management practice, nor communication skills. **It is recommended that the University extend their activities in this area to include job descriptions, clear directions and regular managerial training for the post of Head of Department, with the aims of contributing to potentially less risky – and more benevolent - working conditions for Heads of Department and those answerable to them.**

In summary, a proactive, resolute approach to addressing workplace bullying in NUI Galway, will involve

- Top down, cultural change, to adopt a zero-tolerance-of-bullying, across the University
- Attention to specific work practices, in particular the development of job descriptions for Heads of Department, to include managerial and communication training
- Revisiting and revising the Anti-Bullying Policy and the procedures that flow from it, in particular identifying a 'first step' that inspires more confidence than the present informal route, and increasing openness and transparency in the formal route.

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