A Systematic Literature Review of Staff Bullying and Harassment in Higher Education Institutions

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Background

Workplace bullying is a notoriously difficult and contested construct. Preventing or ameliorating it continues to present a significant challenge in organisations. It is a complex phenomenon in a complex setting. Nielsen et al., while cautioning against comparisons without due consideration of the methodological moderators of location, instrument and sampling strategy, arrived at an average prevalence for being bullied in the workplace of 14.6%, (Nielsen & Einarsen, 2018). There is considerable variation by occupational sector, with a number of large scale studies finding the educational sector to be at risk for higher than average levels of exposure. A small number of studies explore bullying in HEIs although comparison between prevalence estimates is challenging due to variation in aspects of methodology, varying focus of enquiry (e.g. academic staff, professional staff, trade union members) and the fact that many of the studies of workplace bullying in higher education focus on a small number or even a single higher education institution. These limitations notwithstanding, alarmingly high rates of bullying have been reported and while estimates have to be interpreted prudently given the limited information on the provenance of the instruments employed and the cut-off points for "case-ness", they are indicative of a serious problem in higher education.

A systematic review of harassment among staff in higher education was conducted on publications between 1994 and 2013 by Henning et al., 2017, with the aim of reviewing the literature pertaining to harassment in higher education. With 3278 articles initially screened, 51 refereed journal articles were included in the final full text review and analysis (Henning, 2017). Interest in the topic of workplace bullying has accelerated considerably in the past 20 years. The Henning review included only 5 studies that incorporated qualitative interviews, only one wholly qualitative study, and only 11 studies conducted outside the US (Henning, 2017). A rapid search in Scopus database finds almost 13,000 articles on workplace bullying[1] , 65% of which have been published after 2002, and 3,759 conducted outside the US indicating the need for a new systematic review.

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[1] Search terms = "workplace bullying" OR "sexual Harassment" OR "psychological aggression" OR "psychological violence" OR incivility OR ostracism

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this study is to conduct a systematic literature review of staff bullying and harassment in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in order to;

1. Identify new studies undertaken in the past 10 years and any additional studies captured in databases between 2003 and 2013
2. Synthesise findings to explore the particular organisational, structural and contextual factors that are relevant to an understanding of bullying and harassment in HEIs
3. Outline key research directions for workplace bullying and harassment HEIs.

Design and Methods

An online literature search has been conducted using the following databases; Scopus, PubMed, Web of Science, OVIDMedline, Academic Search Complete (including PsychINFO, Cinahl complete, ERIC, and Business Source complete). Search terms were identified from the literature and previous scoping or systematic reviews (e.g. Henning et al., Dhanai et al., Hodgins et al.,) for the three blocks; phenomenon, context and population. Searches were run on abstract/title and abstract, as appropriate for each database, for the alternative terms for each block with Boolean operator OR, and then blocks were combined with Boolean operator AND. Limiters for language (English only) and publications dates (2003-2023) were applied. Records were imported to COVIDENCE software and de-duplicated, resulting in 1,688 records for initial screening. Eligibility assessment and full text review to follow in 2023.