

### **Inquiry into work place bullying**

Dear Members,

Thank you for the opportunity to prepare a submission for this important review. I decided to make this submission as a consequence of the ongoing work place bullying I endured at an Australian University between 2007 and 2010, the subsequent clinical depression (a direct consequence of this relentless bullying) and continued defamation of character I have endured by senior academics from the University.

I was the recipient of a post-doctoral research fellowship, a prestigious fellowship, which provided me with an opportunity to develop expertise overseas. This was a fantastic opportunity. On my return to Australia, this University offered a \$100,000 support grant, as an incentive for me to return to their organisation. I had in writing before my return to Australia that I would be paid at an Academic Level C salary (under their salary range). On my return to Australia, the Head of the Department of this University advised that he was not going to provide the Department's \$50,000 share of the support grant and that he was not prepared to pay me at a Level C salary. This resulted in an ongoing dispute. I subsequently took the matter to the Dean's office after 6 months of negotiating with the Department to no avail. (The Dean's office is above the Department in terms of seniority and oversees all activities in the Faculty which includes a number of Departments). The Dean of the Faculty ruled in my favour. I was awarded the full \$100,000 support grant, and I was to be paid at Level C and the department were requested to provide a desk in an office as soon as possible.

This was to be the beginning of the cycle of work place bullying, by the Head of that Department. I was overlooked for space in an office, despite being a mid-career research fellow and the joint co-ordinator of 67 research higher degree students, while other new and more junior staff members to the Department were being placed in offices. When I complained I was moved to sit between two junior administrative staff in another part of the open plan area. It was not possible to talk with students in this setting and my work was very difficult to carry out. When I complained, I was called the 'squeaky wheel that gets all the oil' it was suggested that I could 'teach the students to be assertive' through my behaviour. Numerous other derogative statements were made to me. When I raised concerns over treatment of some of the students, I was advised that it was 'just a storm in a tea-cup' and not to worry about doing anything further. These were serious cases that required intervention by senior academics.

During this time, a financial account held at the Department in my name, held for the purposes of research was cleaned of funds while I was attending an International conference overseas. I was sent an ultimatum by email to accept a teaching role or not have a position on my return to Australia. By the time I returned to Australia, my access to research funds, which I had acquired was terminated and the position I held as the joint coordinator was allocated to another academic staff member. I was made redundant in this process. It was only after I was made redundant, and had received a letter from the Academic Board of the University congratulating me on my effort as a recipient of a major grant for over a million dollars, that I felt I had enough courage and strength to complain to the Vice Chancellor of the University. I was provided with a small amount of funds to assist in keeping my research going for a short time. I then ended up on Federally funded Sickness Benefits for 6 months.

By the time I was made redundant by the University I was clinically depressed. If it had not been for an intervention by a close friend and colleague who had become concerned for my wellbeing, I would not be here today to tell you my story. I was extremely lucky,

emergency treatment was called and I was looked after, through the worst of the clinical depression. I felt traumatised and shocked at what had happened to me. It has taken until now to be able to write clearly about the cruelty that I endured while at that University. It is appalling that to this very day, I still have these senior academics speaking derogatively about me, to other researchers and students. I know this to be true as it is relayed back to me and they too feel uncomfortable but disempowered to speak up. It is time I spoke up and said this is not ok.

The culture of this University needs to be addressed, before the trauma and shock takes its toll on someone: before there is a suicide. Culture is set from the top. While this particular university (as do other universities) have policies against bullying and harassment, no amount of policies will see this change, unless they are actioned by individuals and individuals stand up and state – this is wrong and there is someone above capable of addressing the issue. It is about creating values that ensure that when something is wrong, people can and are encouraged and expected to stand up and say this is wrong. Rather than cower away and hide or be quickly removed from the environment for daring to take a stand. It should not be acceptable to keep senior academics in their positions, simply because they bring in large amounts of research funding to a University. This is what happened in my case. The people doing the bullying were some of the largest research income generating academics in that University. The cycle of abuse continues in that institution because the people do not suffer any consequences of their bullying behaviour. *Below is one of my stories prepared for Beyond Blue.*

### **Sitting in a Cold Darkened Room**

Sitting in a cold darkened room, huddled on my sofa, cold to the bone. This is how my friend found me. Help was called for and that was the start of my journey back.

I am a researcher, I have a PhD and have held the top research funding in the country. It didn't protect me from depression.

The road back has been long and hard. Never again will I question people being late for work. Some days I still have trouble crawling out of bed. Work is still hard, when people have no idea of depression and its impact and there is a snigger here or there it can be a struggle to keep on the journey.

I am keeping on track and am true to myself. I am on medication and I go for psychology support weekly and that has helped a great deal. Most of all I have learnt to talk to my friends and have stopped the charade.

I now have an understanding, which one cannot buy about depression and I hope someday to be able to make a difference through my work. For now it is one step at a time, keeping my head held high.

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