

House of Representatives
Inquiry into Workplace Bullying
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600
9 June 2012



To whom it may concern

Workplace bullying at the University of

Under the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry: The prevalence of workplace bullying and the experience of *victims*; and role of workplace cultures in preventing and responding to bullying I wish to draw to your attention:

- the entrenched systematic culture of bullying at the University ;
- the lack of support from the University following my initial allegation of bullying; and more importantly
- the enforced punitive punishment regime I experienced following my submission of a formal grievance that attempted to expose bullying within the workplace.

Brief summary of submission:

I experienced 5 years of bullying within my discipline (2000-2005):

- Constant changing of my work tasks (courses deleted without consultation that resulted in the development of new courses outside of my specialization);
- Constant public humiliation (belittling of my expertise/ideas at staff meetings);
- Excessive teaching workload resulting in 75hr plus working week that prevented me from engaging fully with my research commitments;
- Withholding of financial resources allocated to cross-faculty courses that I was responsible for;
- Overt ostracisation following my support for two post-graduate student whistleblowers that were treated badly by senior staff

Lack of support and punitive punishment following my formal allegation of bullying (2005-2008)

- Refusal of the University to allow me to return to my academic duties following sick leave for major depression in early 2005 which I claimed had resulted from bullying;
- The University's refusal to accept medical certificates from my GP, my personal psychiatrist reports and the University funded psychiatrist's reports stating my medical fitness to re-engage with my academic duties;
- Placed under restrictive workplace conditions following my objection to the removal of a 'stop workplace bullying' poster from my office door;
- Stigmatisation of my mental health injury that I had experienced in early 2005 through an University management enforced three year punishment regime of social, professional and physical isolation on campus; and
- The development of a discriminatory survey by Human Resources to justify their draconian and punitive punishment and subsequent forced early retirement.

Dear Honourable MPs

First, I must state that in July 2008 under considerable duress I signed a confidentiality agreement (aligned with a 'voluntary' redundancy) stating that I would not discuss my employment with a third person or take legal action against the University. However, I will always regret being complicit in a cover up of malicious workplace behaviour at the University . Unfortunately, I personally know of too many instances where the complainant and/or whistleblower has been destroyed by a culture that promotes and condones workplace bullying. That the University places higher credibility to traits of malevolence, malice, cowardice and self-protection rather than uphold values of excellence and integrity is shameful and should be exposed.

The attached document provides a time-line of the difficulties that I experienced within my discipline and in particular the response of University senior management following my allegation of bullying in late 2004 until I was 'forced' out of the University in July 2008. I have also attached a survey as an example of the defamatory strategies the implemented to justify their punishment towards someone who lodged a formal grievance alleging bullying.

My problem within geography was not an isolated case. In 2000 the former Head of Discipline set up a research unit that only included himself and two other Human Geographers. Between 2003-2005, four academics left the discipline and relocated out of the building; one academic lost his position that prompted media claims of discrimination; another academic resigned due to the failure of management to assist him with his difficulties; I was formally banished (one week after I lodged my grievance). The remaining academic (outside of the above noted group of three) request to relocate out of the discipline, school and faculty was refused so he sought an alternative position at another University. As a direct consequence of the mishandling of the post-graduate plagiarism allegations in 2002 the discipline lost at least five post-graduate students. Hence, by any standards the loss of eight academics from a total of eleven, and the loss of five post-graduate students is symptomatic of a dysfunctional workplace¹.

I had committed no crime and at no time was I accused of academic misconduct. Yet, over a period of eight years I was subjected to humiliating procedures and processes that attempted to destroy my sense of dignity and undermine my self-esteem. My academic career was destroyed because those that I alleged had bullied me refused my offers of mediation and/or meetings to bring closure. Following my formal allegation of bullying the University enforced a punitive regime of isolation and refused to allow me to engage with my academic duties.

My banishment from my Discipline, School and Faculty was enacted and enforced under threat of dismissal (even after the two respondents named in my grievance had resigned/retired from the University). I believe that the social, professional and physical isolation and exclusion from my discipline, School, Faculty and academic duties represented sanctioned ostracisation that can only be interpreted as intentional infliction of emotional

¹ The Grievance Enquiry Team report exposed severe structural deficiencies within the discipline and School management style and processes.

distress. I also believe that the survey conducted by Human Resources in 2008 to justify my punishment of isolation and banishment from academic duties was constructed with the aim of achieving my permanent elimination from the University.

In reflection, the bullying that I experienced within my discipline was nothing compared to the institutionalised bullying that I experienced from University senior management following the submission of my formal grievance. For over three years I lived in a Kafkaesque-Orwellian nightmare where the truth no longer existed, and lies were accepted as truth. The stress that I suffered resulted in the breakup of my marriage and my forced early retirement has created personal financial difficulties.

The University destroyed my academic career, but my dignity, integrity and my strong desire to continue making a valuable contribution to education remains intact. Since being forced out of the University I have worked as a volunteer with development agencies (*Australian Volunteers International* (2009-2010 and current) and *Indigenous Community Volunteers* (2011) whose values are more closely aligned to mine.

I also remain passionate about eliminating discrimination, injustice and the on-going bullying tactics towards whistleblowers and/or others that speak out about professional misconduct at the University .

I sincerely hope that this inquiry will result in national legislation that will prevent others having their lives socially, economically, psychologically, physically and in some instances permanently so deliberately destroyed.

Yours sincerely

Please note that all documentation supporting my allegations listed below are currently in Australia but I can make arrangements for them to be provided if requested. Additionally I am prepared to return to Australia if my attendance is required.

Time line of events

Abbreviations:

HOS – Head of School (there was two separate HOS during the period of bullying)

HOD – Head of Discipline

PVC – Pro Vice Chancellor

GET – Grievance Enquiry Team

SELS – School of Environmental and Life Sciences

DVC(A) – Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic

Background to discipline problems – pre-2005 sick leave

In **2000**, just prior to taking Study Leave 90 per cent of my teaching for 2001 was deleted without consultation. Despite developing innovative new courses that received high students' evaluations, the practice of deleting my courses without consultation continued.

In **May 2002** I informed Head of School (HoS) (1) that the constant changing of my teaching duties without consultation was having a "deleterious impact on my research output, as well as an added imposition on my workload and my state of health." After making this allegation I was removed from the co-ordination and teaching in all Human Geography courses. Instead I was allocated Environmental Management courses.

Throughout **2002-03** I was extremely outspoken over the treatment towards two postgraduate students who had made allegations of plagiarism. I raised my concern for these students at the discipline, School and Faculty levels. My support for the students was later validated by the Ombudsman Report. However, from this period I was overtly ostracized and continually publically humiliated at discipline meetings by the Head of Discipline (HoD) and two colleagues* (see comments below regarding HR survey).

In **Oct 2003** HoS(2) shortly after her appointment, informed me that I was unpopular with my three colleagues due to my support of the 'plagiarism students' and my submission to the Ombudsman.

Late **2003** and throughout **2004** I continually raised the issue of an unfair workload and constant changing of my teaching duties without consultation at discipline and School levels. (For example, one course when taught by a casual staff member was allocated 375 hours but I was only allocated 100 hours. Additionally, all other academics were allowed 8 hours for each day of field work, but I was allocated less than four hours for a 12 hour day.

In **June 2004** I informed my colleagues, HoD, HoS and PVC Faculty of my GP's recommendation to take stress leave for workplace anxiety depression but that I was unable to follow her advice due to my excessive teaching workload.

University guidelines recommended an annual teaching workload of 200hrs but mine was approximately 500hrs.

Also in **June 2004** I spoke in defence of a colleague who lost his position, who like me, as a human geographer was excluded from the 'group of three.' He later confided to me that he was being treated for suicidal depression.

In **August 2004** I formally informed the HoS and PVC Faculty that I was resigning from the position of B.Science program convenor due to the way in which I was continually being publically humiliated by the HoD over my expertise in B.Science issues.

August-Dec 2004 I challenged the misappropriation of funding lodged with the School for two cross-faculty courses that I coordinated and taught.

In **October 2004** I arranged a meeting with HoS (2) and made a formal allegation of bullying (continual changing of teaching duties without consultation, public humiliation, ostracisation and withholding of financial resources). I also informed her that others within the discipline were being treated in a similar manner. Her response was that I should retire.

Between **2003-2005** four academics left the discipline and building. One academic lost his position, one academic followed the HoS advice to resign when he also complained of bullying; and another academic lodged a request to leave the discipline, school and faculty. Following the mishandling of the plagiarism issue five PhD students left the University.

During **2004** three members of academic staff (including myself) were diagnosed with depression.

January 2005: Promoted to Senior Lecturer and nominated for University Teaching Excellence Award

February 2005: I was diagnosed with major depression and took sick leave. My GP and psychologist

advised me to lodge a Workcover Claim. This was dismissed on the rather spurious grounds that my age made me vulnerable to a depression that did not require stressors.

Post sick-leave

When I returned to work on **16 May 2005** I was relocated to a building on the outer periphery of the University (in a building used mainly for storage). I accepted this office as I believed it would provide me with a 'safe space' until my alleged problems concerning my workload and misallocation of resources was resolved. Climbing out of 'a big black hole' was a major achievement and I certainly had a strong desire to re-engage with my academic duties. I immediately commenced work on completing two research papers for publication.

By **June 2005** it became evident that the University had rejected my GP's medical certificate stating my fitness to return to work. My Semester 2 teaching was re-allocated, and my application for Study Leave (academics are entitled to study leave every three years and my previous study leave was in 2000) was not supported by the HoS as she considered me "too sick" to undertake research. (This was despite submitting two research papers in the previous weeks). The University then placed me under *Clause 33.1: Ill-health: Incapacitated* and I was informed to take "a leave of absence" from 16/6/05 until 06/01/06.

As I was being supported by regular consultations with my GP, psychologist (on campus) and privately funded psychiatrist I refused to accept the University's assessment of my health and their advice to take a 'leave of absence.'

Later, the University would also reject their appointed psychiatrist's reports and recommendations (August 2005 and February 2006) that I was fit to return to academic duties.

June 2005: I informed the VC of my difficulties concerning a return to academic duties following my allegation of bullying. He dismissed me by stating that I should submit a formal grievance.

30 June my aunt (living in the UK) who I experienced a very special and close relationship with was brutally murdered. My frustration over the university's refusal to allow me to re-engage with my

academic duties; the loss of 11 teaching courses over the previous 5 years; combined with the distressing news prompted me to place a *Workplace Bullying Prevention* poster on my office door in the Geography building. Later that day I had a disagreement with the HoS when I formally objected to the removal of my property (the poster) and its placement in a rubbish bin.

As all my attempts to resolve issues at the Discipline, School and Faculty levels had been unsuccessful and the University continued their refusal to allow me to return to academic duties (or any duties) I took the advice from HR and submitted a formal grievance.

On 13 July 2005 I lodged a grievance naming the Head of Discipline (HoD) and Head of School (HoS) as respondents. The latter more for her lack of support and her advice for me to retire when I had taken my allegations of bullying and my doctor's diagnosis of 'workplace anxiety depression' to her in June and October 04. I was advised and agreed to resolve my dispute through mediation. Indeed, I was assured that external professional mediators would be appointed.

20 July 2005: I received instruction that due to "the incident" on 30 June 05 (see above) I was not to "enter the Geography [Social Sciences] building or have contact with students or staff in that area." Please note this instruction was 3 weeks after the 'incident' and one week after lodging a formal grievance. I informed the university to the background to this incident and noted my distressed state due to the disturbing news from the UK.

Grievance

My grievance included issues revolving around:

- Incorrect allocation of workload for my courses and constant changing of teaching responsibilities without consultation;
- Unfair allocation of part-time teaching support – indirectly this also highlighted workload fraud by the group of three Human Geographers;
- Inability to access funding lodged with the School to support the resources for two cross-Faculty courses that I co-ordinated. This highlighted misappropriation of funding at the School level.
- Discrimination and bullying that included
 - Deliberate public humiliation and ostracisation, and the
 - Stigmatization of my mental health injury – noting the University's and my HOS's refusal to allow me to re-engage with my academic duties.

August 2005: I attended consultation with the University's appointed forensic psychiatrist and took leave (late Aug-early Oct) to return to the UK to attend my aunt's funeral and provide care and support to my mother who had suffered a stroke as a consequence of her sister's death.

In her report, noted that my lack of prior history of depression and if my "account of events is accepted then [her] employment probably was a substantial contributory factor to her depression." She also stated that I was "fit for normal duties, commensurate with her qualifications, skills and experience," but advised against returning to my "former work area until resolution of the grievance."

October 2005: On my return from leave I learnt that the two respondents had refused to engage in mediation and I was informed that an internal Grievance Enquiry Team (GET) had been convened.

October – November 2005: I convened meetings with senior management (University and Faculty level) to discuss my 2006 academic duties (teaching and/or study leave). I was repeatedly informed that I could not undertake any academic duties until the completion of the grievance process.

January 06: Head of School (respondent in my grievance) moved out of the Geography Social Sciences building. Her office relocation did not deter the University continuing my entry restrictions into the building on the basis of my argument with her over the removal of my “Stop Workplace Bullying” poster from my former office door in June 2005.

2 February 2006 I received a copy of the Grievance Report. I was shocked, but not surprised to discover that the GET had dismissed my empirical evidence and all testimonials supporting my claims. Instead they accepted behind closed doors unsupported and unsubstantiated oral claims (including the most absurd explanations) to refute my grievance. Furthermore, my grievance had been medicalised. In that, my episode of major depression was the reason why I had a grievance.

Despite being given medical certificates from my GP [redacted] and psychiatrist the GET recommended that my return to work was dependent on further psychological assessment of my health. My GP also requested a meeting with the GET committee but this was refused. Yet, unsupported statements concerning my mental health had been accepted from Human Geographers and a Biologist.

Although I firmly believe that to ensure impartiality all inconsistencies between claims should (and could) have been independently verified, I realized that in order to return to my academic duties I needed to put the whole affair behind me. Therefore, I did not challenge the findings of the report. Anyway this would have been useless, as I was told I could not dispute the findings only the processes involved.

3 February 2006 I attended a pre-arranged consultation with the University’s appointed psychiatrist in Sydney. [redacted] was surprised that I had not been rehabilitated back into my academic duties following her August report. She further informed me that the university now stated that a return to academic duties was dependent on my agreement to work in the ‘Geography’ Social Sciences building under the supervision of the HoD (respondent in my grievance). I agreed to this request

March 06: I was informed by PVC Faculty, that I could not return to academic duties or enter the building as people were very upset over my allegations and they needed “time to recover”. As they were more senior to me and were in effect my managers I was not in a position of power. Moreover, my allegation of bullying had not been validated due to their claims about my “long existent mental health problems”.

June 06 After 18 months of having no duties the PVC Faculty Science and IT suggested that I accept a University wide (three campuses) newly developed First Year Experience (FYE) project work. I was not unhappy with this suggestion; I had been proactive in promoting FYE projects within the Faculty of Science and IT and had established good relationships with Student Support Services staff. But, I had assumed that it was an interim measure. The reality was that I had been demoted from an academic, Senior Lecturer to administration work - Project Manager.

It also became apparent the position did not require someone with my qualifications or skills.

Linked in with my acceptance of the FYE Project Manager position I was informed that my two PhD students would be allocated alternative supervisors. (I continued to supervise them regardless of this mandate).

The university also developed a three year contract (June 06 – June 09) that would increase my superannuation benefits but I was required to sign an agreement stating that I would:

- Never teach again at the University ;
- Have no interaction with any School of Environmental and Life Sciences (SELS) staff members; and
- Under no circumstances enter the “Geography” Social Sciences Building.

The building was later defined to include all parts of the Social Sciences building including lecture theatres and the wing accommodating Faculty of Business and Law staff. Failure to comply with these restrictions would incur financial penalties (the loss of the increased superannuation payments) and being dismissed under misconduct/serious misconduct charges.

June 06: I considered the restrictions in the proposed contract as draconian and as I had every intention of continuing my fight to be allowed to return to academic duties I sought legal advice.

August 06: With legal intervention the contract was dropped, but the restrictions on my movements on campus and interactions with staff in SELS remained. I was informed that these restrictions would be reviewed in **March 2007**.

Head of Discipline (respondent in my grievance) resigned in August 06.

Jan-May 07: I made several enquiries about the procedures for the review into the lifting of the restrictions on my movements on campus. To assist the procedures, I sent my apologies (through DVC(A)) for any distress that my grievance had caused to the two remaining Human Geographers* (who had supported the HoD). I also requested mediation to resolve any outstanding issues and/or meetings to bring closure. I was informed that my requests were refused.

During this period I also arranged a meeting with the Chancellor and asked for assistance in being allowed to return to academic duties. He informed me that he was not in a position to intervene.

At a later date he informed me that Geography had a long reputation for bullying.

30 May 07: In a further attempt to re-engage with my academic duties I convened a meeting with senior University, DVC(A) and Faculty Management to enquire about lifting the restrictions on my movements and to normalize my professional relationships with members of my discipline. I was formally informed that some problems cannot be resolved.

1 June 07: In a letter to the DVC(A) I noted:

“In response to your statement that some problems cannot be resolved, I sincerely believe that no problem is irresolvable if there is good will from both parties. I therefore, remain concerned over the current restriction on my movement, my banishment from my discipline, School and Faculty and my inability to re-engage with academic duties. There is always a need to draw a line and move forward. To do otherwise, causes unnecessary distress and ill-will for all concerned.”

Head of School (the person that I had the disagreement with over her removal of a Workplace Bullying poster from my office door that prompted my banishment) retired in June 07.

August 07: As the University had not undertaken the review on the restrictions promised for March 2007, and the two respondents named in my July 05 grievance were no longer employees at the University I sought legal advice to have the restrictions lifted.

November 07: In response to my solicitor's (August) request that all restrictions be lifted so that I can return to my academic duties the University responded by stating that "in light" of the altercation with a staff member in June 05" the restriction was necessary to "meet its occupational health and safety obligations." Additionally it was stated that "[T]he University is not prepared to offer any teaching responsibilities in the Discipline of Geography, because that would require her to interact with other staff in the School of Environment and Life Sciences." It was also stated that I would be made redundant in June 09 (basically the University had followed through on the conditions that I had rejected in the above noted three year contract).

March-May 08: In response to my solicitor's persistence to overturn the University's resolve not to allow me to return to academic duties the University developed a survey to determine whether my "return would adversely impact on the working environment for staff and/or the operations of the area." (See attached survey)

Only two people, (the two Human Geographers* who had been favoured by the previous HoD) who completed this survey were involved or familiar with my grievance. The others were newly appointed staff members who had never worked with me. I had not been allowed to communicate with anyone from that School or enter the building since July 2005.

The University forwarded the completed survey forms (via my solicitor). As a social scientist I was shocked at the inherent bias and discriminatory questions and eight staff members (including senior academics) completed a survey that would not have received ethics approval. And, that seven staff members noted that it would cause them stress if I entered or visited the building. Let me repeat, only two respondents had any personal involvement in the original dispute that precipitated the draconian measures to exclude me from my academic career.

I was very distressed on receipt of the surveys, particularly the way that I was demonised and the accompanying letter stating that the University regarded the results of the survey "as sufficient basis for it not to change the arrangements and the restrictions that apply to .". I immediately went on sick leave.

June-July 08: While on sick leave the University arranged for me to sign a confidentiality statement linked with a 'voluntary' redundancy package.

The five years of bullying within my discipline and my three year struggle to be allowed to re-engage with my academic duties following sick leave in early 2005 affected me psychologically and physically. I believe that the enforced isolation restrictions enacted by the University and the survey (below) constructed me as someone who had committed a heinous crime. I will never, ever fully recover or be able to erase the memories of the bullying that I experienced at the University of