

ATHENA SWAN STAFF CONSULTATION WORKING GROUP

ANNUAL REPORT TO IHW AS SAT

Submission date: 15/09/2021

Executive summary: Athena Swan 2021 Staff Consultation ‘Dignity at Work’

‘Experiences of dignity at work amongst staff members of the Institute of Health and Wellbeing’

1. Overview

The staff consultation aimed to explore Institute of Health and Wellbeing staff experiences of ‘Dignity at Work,’ as relating to the University’s ‘Dignity at Work and Study Policy and Procedure’ guidelines. Specifically, the consultation aimed to understand peoples experiences of workplace culture across IHW, and to detail any experiences relating to harassment, bullying, discrimination, and victimisation as witnessed and/or experienced by IHW staff. These experiences were also linked to participants experiences of remote working during the COVID-19 pandemic. The interviews were conducted in response to a recent IHW staff survey, wherein 4.3% of IHW staff reported being bullied or harassed at work, and 8.1% reported witnessing bullying or harassment at work.

Considering the sensitive nature of the topic the staff consultation group decided it would be appropriate for the interviewer to come from outside IHW, and all correspondence with participants to go directly to them to ensure confidentiality. Additionally, an executive summary of the main findings has been developed, as some of the experiences of bullying and harassment documented within the main report were potentially identifying and deemed inappropriate for wider circulation.

The consultation project recruited 11 participants from across the IHW, involving 10 semi-structured interviews and one email exchange. Most of the sample were women (n=9; 82%). Slightly more MPA staff (n=6; 55%) took part than RT staff (n=5; 45%), which is notable as MPA staff make up approximately a quarter of IHW staff. A range of grades were represented; n=4 (36%) Grade 4, n=3 (27%) Grade 6 and 7, and n=4 (36%) Grade 8 and 9. Most of the sample (n=8; 73%) were full-time.

2. Findings

The report suggests that staff at IHW believe there are many positive aspects to working within the institute. The workplace culture was described as friendly, supportive, and collaborative, with relationships with colleagues and line-managers positively contributing to participants positive experiences. Praise was also largely given regarding the IHW’s support of staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

2.1 Bullying and harassment

However, participants also described a number of serious issues relating to problematic workplace behaviour within IHW. Bullying and harassment were the most widely cited forms of problematic

behaviour, and most participants had either directly experienced or witnessed incidents of bullying and harassment within their research group, with incidents taking the form of both overt and/or covert bullying and harassing behaviour. Some incidents were recent or ongoing, and some were historical, occurring five or more years ago, however, such events still had a long tail impact on staff today. Commonly experienced forms of overt bullying and harassment included verbal abuse and shouting, whilst covert behaviour included ignoring staff member's inputs during meetings and being rude or 'difficult' with staff members. Such incidents were cited as having notable and, in some cases, longstanding, negative impacts on staff member's physical/mental health and wellbeing.

Interviewees viewed the structural hierarchy of the institute, and the wider University, as an important factor in bullying and harassment incidents. These incidents were largely described as relating to the power dynamics between job families and pay grades. Specifically, bullying behaviour was commonly perpetrated by senior R&T staff towards junior staff, particularly those employed on lower pay grades or within MPA job roles. Gender was also a prominent theme, as many participants described incidents perpetrated by male staff towards female staff, whereby gender was felt to be a contributing factor. Such dynamics of power became more complex when they intersected; participants disadvantaged within the hierarchical workplace structure who also possessed one or more protected characteristics appeared particularly vulnerable to bullying and harassment.

Participants described incidents that included speaking to staff members in a derogatory or demeaning manner, including being overly critical of staff members work or questioning their competency at their role. Other examples included speaking in an aggressive or abusive tone or verbally abusing staff members. Some reported that R&T staff could be rude and unreasonably demanding of the MPA staff, and one described '*oppressive management styles*' from senior academic staff who acted in a manner that included covert forms of bullying and harassment, such as inappropriate tone of voice and manner. Some felt this reflected an inequality in the institute, whereby people are not treated the same, such that the R&T staff could view themselves as superior to MPA staff, or 'elite'. Therefore, these power dynamics can leave MPA staff, and lower grade R&T staff, vulnerable to potential bullying and harassment. However, based on the limited information gathered through this consultation, it is difficult to ascertain if this behaviour originates from a 'few bad apples' or is indicative of a wider workplace culture of bullying and harassment of MPA staff.

2.2 Line managers

For those who experience bullying and harassment, an open and trusting relationship with line-managers and colleagues appeared to be crucial in managing such situations. Breakdowns in this relationship can discourage staff from seeking support and in instigating informal and/or formal complaints procedures. A view was shared amongst these participants that line managers will not always believe staff, particularly junior staff. Furthermore, that if incidents are reported they will not always be dealt with appropriately, due to a perceived desire for some line-managers to avoid conflict. Other considerations include that a line-manager could be the source of, or a perceived proponent of, the bullying and harassing behaviour, or that in instigating complaints procedures the line-manager could become the target of bullying behaviour themselves.

2.3 Complaints procedure

Most participants who had experienced bullying or harassing behaviour were not satisfied by the informal complaint's procedure. Some participants felt it worsened dynamics between staff, whilst others found that the overt bullying or harassing behaviour they were experiencing became more covert. One interviewee who was a line manager stated that the informal complaints procedure can be difficult for managers to navigate and can cause considerable emotional distress for all parties involved. Participants felt that even when complaints are made, not enough was done to tackle the behaviour if it was a senior staff member perpetuating the bullying and harassing behaviour, and

therefore they did not appear to experience any consequences. Furthermore, some participants felt that reporting bullying or harassment can result in serious forms of victimisation, including loss of employment and receiving a poor reference. Knowledge of such incidents can further discourage staff from making informal or formal complaints and can allow such behaviour to continue.

2.4 Bystander intervention

Although some participants cited the usefulness of IHW bystander training, knowing how and when to respond to bullying was widely referenced as an issue. Two female participants cited a lack of intervention from colleagues when they experienced bullying and harassment. One particularly stressed the isolation she felt, which further contributed to the negative repercussions of her experiences. Indeed, not all staff members who witnessed bullying or harassment feel able to respond appropriately to it, with reasons including confusion as to when a line had been crossed into bullying/harassing behaviour, and fear of negative repercussions, particularly amongst junior members of staff regarding senior staff behaviour. A sense that staff who speak up may also become the target of bullying and/or harassment was also highlighted as a barrier to bystander intervention.

2.5 Workplace culture issues

Wider issues relating to the work culture of the IHW also formed a theme amongst R&T staff. The relationship between workloads amongst junior staff and unintentional discriminatory behaviour was raised. It was indicated that a general culture of over-working is normalised within the IHW, particularly amongst senior R&T staff. Specific examples cited included scheduling meetings during protected working hours or setting work deadlines set without consideration of staff member's childcare duties. Such issues can discriminate against staff members with caring duties, most particularly young, female staff members. Moreover, the view was shared that such behaviour can lead to selection bias, as staff who cannot conform to the work culture are less likely to be promoted to senior positions.

In conclusion, it is clear from the consultation sample that staff member's generally view the IHW workplace culture positively. However, incidents of workplace bullying, and harassment also appear to be issues across IHW research groups, alongside potential issues of victimisation and discrimination. Power dynamics informed by staff members protected characteristics, alongside staff members positions within the workplace hierarchy, must be considered. This report will now provide some recommendations and suggestions in response to these issues.

2.6 Participant thoughts and suggestions

During the interviews, some participants made suggestions they wished to share with IHW. For example, one participant felt it was challenging for staff to find the time to read the 'dignity at work' policy as it was long and inaccessible, and suggested the information in the policy could be provided in more accessible 'bite-size' pieces. They also suggested excerpts from the policy could be outlined on the IHW login screen or University landing pages, or be used as 'signature statements' at the end of emails, as this could help effectively integrate the expectations of the policy into staff member's everyday lives. One participant noted it would be useful for IHW to have approachable staff members to provide informal support regarding these issues, and as this already exists it should continue to be promoted and made easily accessible. Several participants felt some of the training could be viewed as 'box ticky' and a chore, and it was suggested that discussion-based training events which invited reflection on the part of participants could deepen staff members knowledge, particularly in understanding covert and unintentional harassment and discrimination. Finally, several participants also indicated they thought a '360' approach to workplace appraisals could also be a potentially effective way for line-managers and senior staff members to develop a clearer understanding of the impacts of their managerial styles on junior staff.

3. Recommendations and suggestions

3.1. Overall recommendations

- Greater dissemination and promotion of Dignity at Work procedures, particularly regarding who to talk to in the case of experiencing bullying and harassment, by making the dignity at work policy more accessible to staff.
- Improving understanding of what forms workplace bullying, harassment, discrimination and victimisation can take, particularly unintentional and covert forms, making clear that these behaviours are unacceptable, regardless of the seniority of the perpetrator, and should be 'called out'.
- Helping staff to feel comfortable 'calling out' or reporting bullying and harassing behaviour by clearly promoting a supportive and re-assuring environment where these experiences will be taken seriously.
- The institute should provide and promote clear guidelines for line-managers and staff members regarding expectations of effective informal responses to bullying and harassment, providing support for these procedures to be carried out.
- Specific training and resources regarding the impact of intersectional forms of oppression and disadvantage within hierarchical workplace organisations, particularly related to staff members who are vulnerable to bullying and harassment due to their job status and possession of protected characteristics.

3.2 Potential SAT actions

- Engage with University of Glasgow HR to improve the accessibility of the Dignity at Work policy. For example, it is not immediately clear what the policy entails when you visit the webpage and you need to select from a drop down to access each aspect of the policy.
- To help promote the policy more widely and help bystanders to feel more comfortable 'calling out' inappropriate behaviour, it would be useful to identify bite-size messages highlighting overt and covert forms of bullying and harassment, intersectional vulnerabilities, and as well as how to tackle these behaviours effectively, for incorporation into Asha's fortnightly email. These should emphasise allyship and include effective bystander tactics.