# Workplace Bullying and Its Effects at A Higher Education Institution (HEI): Academics' Perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

This research explored workplace bullying (WB) among academic staff, recognizing its detrimental effects on mental health and job performance. The study aimed to understand the WB experienced by academic staff and its impact on their work effectiveness and to propose solutions. There is a significant gap in research regarding WB in academia, particularly affecting academic personnel. Using a qualitative exploratory design, the researchers accessed only six academic staff members conveniently, due to the sensitive nature of the study and conducted semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed manually through thematic analysis and inductive coding. Findings revealed that workplace bullying is prevalent among junior and new academic staff members due to power abuse, due to junior and new staff powerlessness, inability to command respect, and due to their general lack of community and collegiality. Consequently, the presence of WB negatively affects the victims mentally leading to deteriorated job performance. The study underscores workplace bullying as a critical issue, affecting both employee welfare and organizational effectiveness. The HEI should implement mental well-being strategies, such as peer support systems, mentoring, and workshops on bullying in the workplace. The HEI has first-hand information about WB, its consequences, and how to prevent and minimize the effects through the WB policy development.

## INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying has garnered significant attention in research over the past several decades, in various sectors including academia (Hoprekstad et al., 2023; Madolo & Hloba, 2023). Evidence shows that it cultivates a toxic work environment and acts as a major source of stress (Hoprekstad et al., 2023; Madolo & Hloba, 2023), ultimately inflicting serious psychological harm on victims (Goodboy et al., 2022), among other adverse consequences. In academic circles, workplace bullying has been extensively studied and is particularly rampant among young, female, newly hired, and untenured staff (Goodboy et al., 2022). The prevailing literature confirms the assertion that workplace bullying is widespread within academic institutions (Goodboy et al., 2022; Striebing, 2022), underscoring the urgent need for higher education institutions to acknowledge its presence and the severe ramifications that accompany it.

Workplace bullying constitutes a pervasive and detrimental issue that afflicts a significant proportion of employees across various professional domains (Piotrowski & King, 2015). A particularly concerning variant of this phenomenon is academic bullying, which represents instances of harassment occurring within academic institutions, such as universities and research facilities (Prevost & Hunt, 2018; Striebing, 2022). This form of bullying is alarmingly widespread and incurs substantial financial and psychological costs to the institutions involved (Migliaccio et al., 2024). Despite its prevalence, the topic remains conspicuously under-researched within the academic literature (Striebing, 2022). In higher education institutions (HEIs), academic staff members are typically structured hierarchically, which reinforces power dynamics and authority. This hierarchy comprises distinct roles including junior lecturers, lecturers, senior lecturers, associate professors, and full professors,

all of which create clear power differentials that can enable the victimization of those in subordinate positions.

Additionally, a culture characterized by formal title usage prevails within academia, where individuals are addressed according to their academic rank professors are referred to as "Professor", and holders of Doctorates or PhDs are designated as "Dr". This nomenclature can further exacerbate the potential for power abuse. In such an environment, workplace bullying often proliferates, as junior staff members may fear reprisal if they choose to report misconduct by their superiors, including senior faculty or administrators (Piotrowski & King, 2015). Evidence suggests that contract academic employees and postgraduate (PhD) students face heightened levels of bullying perpetrated by senior staff members (Prevost & Hunt, 2018). However, there remains a critical gap in understanding the specific demographics most affected by workplace bullying within the HEI in question. Therefore, this study aims to rigorously investigate the presence of workplace bullying at the institution, delineate its victims, and formulate robust recommendations for addressing this pressing issue.

Workplace bullying (WB) is defined as a calculated and deliberate process aimed at targeting an individual in a subordinate position to inflict harm (Hodgins & McNamara, 2017; Migliaccio et al., 2024). It arises from individual issues, such as personality conflicts and personal traits, as well as organizational factors such as power abuse, ineffective communication, and insufficient resources, among others (Migliaccio et al., 2024). As a result, workplace bullying is an all-too-common phenomenon in organizations globally, including in higher education institutions like universities. This insidious behavior can manifest in various forms, including verbal assault, offensive conduct, intimidation, and humiliation, all of which create a toxic and oppressive work environment (Abd Al-al et al., 2024; Madolo & Hloba, 2023). Moreover, bullying is characterized as aggressive behavior that inflicts emotional harm on others within contexts of power imbalances (Abd Al-al et al., 2024). Additionally, workplace bullying can assume many distinct forms. In a 2016 study, nurses recounted experiences of being dismissed by colleagues or superiors, burdened with difficult or

unmanageable tasks, subjected to humiliation, having their responsibilities usurped by others, and being kept in the dark about critical information that adversely affected their performance and mental well-being (Abd Al-al et al., 2024).

Bullying can be classified into two primary types: vertical bullying and horizontal bullying. Vertical bullying involves individuals wielding power who intimidate or harass those in subordinate positions, while horizontal bullying pertains to aggressive, harmful, or damaging behavior manifested through hostile words, attitudes, or actions directed at peers within the same hierarchical level (Abd Al-al et al., 2024). In a comprehensive review by Bambi et al. (2018) in the health sector, the prevalence of bullying was found to range from 2.4% to 8%. Alarmingly, up to 75% of victims experience both physical and psychological aftermaths, and 10% of bullied nurses exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Horizontal bullying involves conflicts among colleagues operating on the same level (Abd Al-al et al., 2024). A systematic review revealed that the incidence of horizontal bullying among newly graduated nurses soared between 6.8% and 73.1% (Kiprillis et al., 2022). In a study conducted at a hospital in Greece, it was estimated that 53.1% of doctors and 53.6% of nurses fell victim to workplace bullying (Chatziioannidis et al., 2018). Various studies indicate that between 15% and 36% of employees endure bullying in their workplace (Abd Al-al et al., 2024). Moreover, a study in Jordan by Al Muala and Ali (2016) reported that 49.5% of participants faced high levels of bullying behavior, while 50.5% encountered similarly detrimental actions. Workplace bullying exists in all professional environments, including academia. Therefore, it must be confronted decisively, and effective solutions must be implemented to mitigate its harmful effects.

To comprehensively understand the profound emotional, psychological, and mental repercussions of workplace bullying and to propose robust solutions, several influential theories were examined. The Transactional Theory of Stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984) illuminates how stressors, such as bullying behaviors, coupled with an individual's inability to effectively cope, can trigger a significant strain response. This theory delineates the progression of stress as follows: (1)

an individual encounters a formidable challenge, (2) the person evaluates the demands of the situation (primary appraisal) and assesses their available coping resources (secondary appraisal), and (3) the individual formulates a coping strategy (Feizi et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024). In this research, we enhance this theory by positing that academics may opt to disregard the bullying based on anticipated outcomes from their relationship with the perpetrator, thereby conforming to the negative dynamics of the bullying behavior.

According to Rosander et al (2022), the cognitive activation theory of stress elucidates the mechanisms through which stressors can precipitate mental health issues. Continuous exposure to workplace bullying, as articulated by Hoprekstad et al. (2023) engenders cognitive trauma that disorients the individual, leading to diminished well-being and serious mental health complications (Sanchez-Gomez et al., 2021). Although academia is typically regarded as a venerable and professional environment, encountering workplace bullying can be profoundly destabilizing, shattering an academic's sense of security and severely impacting their mental health and overall well-being.

Furthermore, to elucidate how workplace bullying may culminate in subpar performance and heightened turnover, the Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model serves as an incisive framework (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). This model articulates principles that clarify the interplay between job demands and resources, illustrating how workplace bullying, as a significant job demand, affects academics when they lack sufficient resources to cope with the stress induced by such negative behaviors (Farley et al., 2023).

Prior research has rigorously examined both individual and organizational factors that contribute to workplace bullying, identifying critical elements such as job ambiguity, role conflict, excessive work demands, monotonous tasks, and unclear responsibilities as significant risk factors. Key determinants like organizational type, work environment, management practices, deficiencies in procedural justice, inadequate psychosocial safety, and leadership styles are believed to escalate bullying incidents within organizations (Feijo et al., 2019). Numerous studies have demonstrated a clear correlation between the prevalence of workplace bullying and adverse physical and psychological health outcomes, revealing its detrimental effects on job satisfaction, self-esteem, productivity, and organizational loyalty (Glambek et al., 2016; Havaei et al., 2020).

Furthermore, a handful of investigations have uncovered a significant positive relationship between workplace bullying and mental health challenges (Goodboy et al., 2022; Itzhaki et al., 2015; Madolo & Hloba, 2023). In particular, certain studies highlighted a noteworthy connection between workplace bullying and the psychological well-being of nurses, influencing their job performance, turnover intentions, and overall job satisfaction (Al Muala & Ali, 2016; Chatziioannidis et al., 2018). Alarmingly, stress has emerged as one of the most prevalent psychological symptoms among nurses subjected to workplace bullying, leading to severe consequences such as fatigue, insomnia, impaired decision-making, anxiety, and depression (Goodboy et al., 2022; Mikkelsen et al., 2020).

Overall, extensive research indicates that workplace bullying can induce significant stress (Liu et al., 2019), mental breakdowns, job dissatisfaction, and diminished performance (Migliaccio et al., 2024), as well as increasing turnover intentions (Ribeiro et al., 2024) and actual employee turnover (Biswakarma et al., 2024; Coetzee & van Dyk, 2018).

This study examines a higher education institution (HEI) that employs two categories of staff: administrative and academic employees. Administrative employees are vital in supporting academic staff by managing essential functions such as human resources, finance, supply chain operations, library services, and information technology. Conversely, academic employees are tasked with the critical responsibility of educating students who enroll at the HEI. Consequently, academic employees must sustain optimal health—physically, mentally, and psychologically. Regrettably, this is frequently undermined by the pervasive issue of workplace bullying (Goodboy et al., 2022).

The hierarchical and power-driven structures inherent in academia foster an environment that is ripe for workplace bullying. Therefore, we assert that workplace bullying is not only a pervasive issue but also a profoundly detrimental one within academic institutions (Thomson & Catley, 2021)

that warrants urgent intervention. If left unchecked, marginalized staff members (Misawa, 2015; Rosander et al., 2020; Striebing, 2022) will likely resign, ultimately crippling the effectiveness of the organization as a whole. This knowledge is essential for mitigating the harmful repercussions of bullying, including employee burnout and elevated absenteeism (Liu et al., 2019). Therefore, exploring WB and its effects on academic employees can provide the HEI with critical insights into how to confront and resolve such incidents. As a result, the main objective of this study was: To explore the reasons for workplace bullying at the HEI, identify the consequences of workplace bullying on the victims, and determine strategies to mitigate the effects and prevent WB occurrences.

## METHODS

This qualitative study was designed to explore academics' experiences with (WB) using interpretive and phenomenological approaches. These methods provide rich descriptions and detailed accounts, allowing for a deeper understanding of the phenomena while maintaining objectivity (Køster & Fernandez, 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By focusing on depth over breadth, qualitative research enables detailed analyses of individual cases or small groups, leading to a comprehensive understanding of the studied phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Santillan-Anguiano & González-Machado, 2023).

The study was conducted at a previously disadvantaged rural-based higher education institution in Limpopo province in South Africa, with the majority of black students and academics. Due to its location and status, the HEI struggles to attract new and diverse academics and students.

The study was approved by the highest ethics approval body at the HEI to conduct the study within the HEI. Due to the sensitive nature of the title, the researchers approached familiar and conveniently available academics as potential participants. Consented participants signed informed consent and were later sent qualitative survey questions (open-ended interview questions) via email for completion.

The HEI has approximately 650 academics and due to the nature of the study, a convenient sampling was used to approach academics considering their busy schedules (Czernek-

Marszałek & McCabe, 2024). As mentioned earlier, due to the sensitive nature of the topic, the researchers avoided contact interview sessions and used online open-ended questions to avoid making the participants uncomfortable. Six participants aged between 28-51, 3 males and 3 females, the majority with postgraduate degrees, responded in time for data analyses, as the study had stipulated timeframes.

This qualitative study utilized an online survey featuring open-ended questions (Santillan-Anguiano & González-Machado, 2023) that was designed to take no more than 30 minutes to complete. The survey asked participants about their experiences with workplace bullying (WB), with the expectation of receiving detailed and in-depth responses.

Data was analyzed using thematic qualitative data analysis methods, which involves immersing in the data with interpretivism lenses. Moreover, thematic analysis enabled the researchers to explore participants' perspectives, insights, understanding, and experiences regarding workplace bullying at the HEI. Steps involved grouping similar, repeating, and interesting words together (subthemes) as a coding technique and clustering them into themes. Due to the deductive nature of the study, all theme themes emerged from the questions asked to the participants (Proudfoot, 2023).

To ensure transparency and credibility of the result, the survey responses were transferred to a Word document for analysis and a co-coder was used to verify the results as analyzed by the first researcher. To ensure authenticity, the researchers approached and considered responses of only academics who have experienced WB, thus being able to provide rich, detailed data combined with their lived experiences. For confirmability, the researchers remained objective by bracketing their own biases, so as not to contaminate the result (Proudfoot, 2023).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

These findings provide answers to the questions: What do you think are the reasons for workplace bullying at the University, what are the consequences of workplace bullying on the victims and what strategies would you suggest to prevent workplace bullying at the university? The results of this study are structured according to the thematic insights derived from the data analysis.

**Reasons for Workplace Bullying**

When responding to the question about the reasons for the prevalence of WB at the HEI, powerlessness, abuse of power as well as lack of community, collegiality between junior staff members, and general lack of respect from the senior staff, emerged as subthemes from the responses.

1. Powerlessness (victims)

Participants reported that as junior staff members, they are not consulted on major decisions because they are not valued. "Decisions are often made without consulting us. It's demoralizing to have no say in choices that affect our academic work and students' learning experiences" (P3, female). This can be attributed to the hierarchical power structures whereby junior staff members are not respected (Hodgins et al., 2024). Moreover, the respondents indicated that "As a junior lecturer, I feel invisible when it comes to professional development opportunities. My suggestions for projects or collaborations are rarely taken seriously, and there's a sense that younger voices don't matter in this institution (P6, male). This phenomenon occurs because they are ignored and their inputs are not valued because they are seen as unknowledgeable and thus powerless in academic matters (Hodgins et al., 2024).

Lastly, the informant mentioned "We try to push for changes that would improve staff morale, like better communication or more transparent promotion criteria, but our input is often ignored. It's like we're caught between the needs of the academic staff and the rigid expectations of the administration (P2, female). Junior staff members often find their perspectives overlooked and undervalued, as they must first earn respect by progressing to senior roles within academia. Consequently, they may experience bullying, which stems from the systemic power structures prevalent in the academic environment, often characterized by masculine or male-dominated dynamics (Goodboy et al., 2022; Hodgins et al., 2024). Additionally, despite enduring bullying, many victims show little interest in reporting such workplace behavior. This reluctance can be attributed to a need for conformity to survive and advance in their careers (Hodgins et al., 2024; Zabrodska et al., 2011).

2. Abuse of power (bullies)

The respondents revealed that the senior academics misuse their power unnecessarily thus becoming bullies (Hodgins & McNamara, 2017; Migliaccio et al., 2024) and this was evident in the following quote: "I've been belittled in front of students by a senior lecturer. It was humiliating because I started feeling like I did not understand what I was doing" (P1, female). They tend to belittle and humiliate their juniors by publicly questioning their competencies: "My superior would constantly question my abilities and make me feel incompetent about my work" (P1, female). At the time the junior academics are not victims but they witness others being bullied: "As a senior lecturer, I've seen how power dynamics can be used to intimidate or control others" (P3, male) and exploited because they are young and new: "Senior staff often exploit their power to bully junior employees. It's a culture of fear" (P4, female), and those who resist the abuse or attempt to speak out get intimidated: "I've witnessed exclusion tactics, where certain staff are left out of important meetings or decisions as well as yelling and physical threats made against staff, especially during conflicts over resources" (P6, male). These findings are also in line with existing literature that concluded that WB is a direct result of abused power (Abd Al-al et al., 2024; Bansel et al., 2009; Hodgins et al., 2024; Hodgins & McNamara, 2017). In academia, the hierarchical structure promotes power abuse (Migliaccio et al., 2024).

3. Lack of community, respect, and collegiality

Findings further revealed a lack of community and collegiality amongst junior academic employees that opens doors for abuse (Dawson et al., 2022; Jandric, 2022), as noted here: "I rarely feel a sense of solidarity or support from other departments or even within my own. It's as though we're all working in silos, which makes the workplace feel more isolating and difficult" (P5, male). As a result, they experience more disrespect from the senior's academics (Goodboy et al., 2022; Hodgins et al., 2024) as noted in these quotes: "Some of my former colleagues used to share with me that they would at times receive aggressive emails from colleagues, and it was an unsettling ordeal for them" (P5, male) and "Colleagues would often subtly undermine your work ethic and reduce your standard as an academic, more especially if

you are at a junior position" (P1, female). These findings suggest that the lack of support and collegiality amongst junior staff members is considered conducive to disrespect and workplace bullying. The literature highlights that academia can often be a solitary environment, indicating that new employees must establish alliances with their peers at the earliest opportunity to mitigate feelings of isolation and potential mistreatment (Jandric, 2022).

Additionally, to earn respect within this domain, emerging academics must demonstrate perseverance in their scholarly pursuits, striving for advanced qualifications such as doctoral or professorial titles. This is important as respect in academia is typically conferred based on these titles, which facilitate opportunities for publications, conference presentations, and contributions to books and chapters (Lewis, 2019). Furthermore, collegial relationships in academia are often predominantly experienced by senior academics who, having collaborated over extended periods, have cultivated mutual respect (Dawson et al., 2022). Within higher education institutions, instances of workplace bullying (WB) disproportionately affect junior lecturers, particularly those who lack a PhD or are in the process of completing one. These individuals frequently find themselves under the supervision of those engaging in such detrimental behavior, rendering the prevalence of WB a pressing issue, as junior staff may prioritize their academic progress and studies over confronting these challenges (Hodgins et al., 2024).

**Consequences of Workplace Bullying**

When responding to the question about the consequences of workplace bullying on the victims, mental health implication was the only subtheme that emerged. From the findings, it appears that the participants endure significant repercussions from bullying, with mental health challenges being the most frequently mentioned. These challenges can trigger cardiovascular complications, such as panic attacks, as noted here: "The constant criticism made me question my professional abilities. I started having panic attacks before meetings" (P1, female), and these panic attacks lead to serious physiological effects, including severe sleep disruptions as noted here: "I couldn't sleep, and I felt overwhelmed with hopelessness. It got to a point where I avoided the workplace entirely" (P2, female) and absenteeism

and turnover intentions: "I felt trapped. The constant tension at work left me irritable and emotionally drained. I started seeing I couldn't sleep, and I felt overwhelmed with hopelessness. It got to a point where I avoided the workplace entirely (P3, male). The major repercussions for the mental health implications were the resultant poor job performance in the form of work avoidance and high absenteeism rates. Previous studies confirm these findings because WB was found to lead to poor mental health and health problems including cardiovascular problems (Goodboy et al., 2022; Mikkelsen et al., 2020), physiological problems such as sleep deprivation or disruptions (Nielsen et al., 2020) and more importantly high absenteeism (Liu et al., 2019) and turnover intentions (Biswakarma et al., 2024; Coetzee & van Dyk, 2018). These WB in academia seem to be inevitable and their consequences appear to be detrimental to one's health and overall individual job and organizational performance.

**Strategies to Curb Workplace Bullying**

When responding to the question about the strategies they would suggest to prevent workplace bullying at the university, the participants suggested peer support, mentoring and workshops. It appears that the junior staff wishes to have a sense of solidarity that senior staff shares with each other because it leads to peer support: "Among the senior colleagues, there's a strong sense of solidarity, especially when it comes to sharing research resources or offering advice on complex academic matters. However, this sense of community doesn't always extend beyond our immediate circle, and sometimes junior staff are left out, which creates a divide" (P3, male). The participants also revealed that they could benefit from mentoring: "It's been a struggle to form connections with my peers. While some supportive individuals offer guidance, it often feels like everyone is busy managing their workload. The competitive atmosphere can make it difficult to find genuine solidarity, especially as a junior member of the team (P6, male), whereby a mentor will share valuable experiences for academic and personal growth: "Sharing experiences with trusted colleagues provided emotional validation and created a sense of solidarity, which empowered them to confront bullying behaviors" (P1, female), and with one senior academic as a junior's mentor, the WB is

likely to diminish: "Senior colleagues, acting as mentors, provided guidance on navigating institutional hierarchies and strategies for de-escalating conflicts" (P4, female), and lastly the participants revealed that they would appreciate workshops: "Peer-led workshops and initiatives helped normalize discussions about bullying, breaking the stigma around reporting and creating a proactive approach to prevention" (P3, male). These findings are supported by previous literature, as peer support was found to discourage and reduce bullying and its effects (Whybrow et al., 2015), mentoring was found to dispel bullying, either by the senior academic (mentor) or other academics out of respect for the mentor (Holis, 2024) and finally, a workshop or artful workshops about WB and its consequences was found to reduce occurrences of WB by sensitizing perpetrators of their actions and consequences (Edwards & Blackwood, 2017).

Measures exist to prevent workplace bullying (WB) at the HEI, yet perpetrators continue to undermine these efforts, knowing that incidents are unlikely to be reported. Victims often choose silence to complete their PhDs and secure promotions, prioritizing the attainment of respectable titles like Dr., which leads them to conform rather than leave their higher education institutions (HEIs) (Hodgins et al., 2024; Piotrowski & King, 2015). The academic landscape is small and interconnected, making it risky for victims to report WB, as they may face ostracism from their peers (Prevost & Hunter, 2018).

According to the Transactional Theory of Stress (Feizi et al., 2024; Li et al., 2024; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), despite their difficult circumstances—outlined by the cognitive activation theory of stress (Sanchez-Gomez et al., 2021) victims often cope with WB to pursue favorable outcomes. Ultimately, they trade their mental well-being for support from senior academics, allowing WB to persist in advancing their careers.

## CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to explore the reasons for workplace bullying at the HEI, identify the consequences of workplace bullying on the victims, and determine strategies to mitigate the effects and prevent WB occurrences. The objectives were reached in three-fold. Firstly, the findings revealed that power abuse by perpetrators, the victims' lack of power, the inability to command respect, and the general lack of community and collegiality are the reasons WB exists at the HEI. Secondly, findings revealed that due to the prevalent WB, victims suffer from mental health implications leading to stress and panic attacks, lack of sleep, and turnover intentions, thus affecting their overall job performance. Thirdly, the findings revealed that peer support systems, mentoring, and workshops on bullying in the workplace should be implemented as strategies to curb workplace bullying and its effects.

The findings affirm workplace bullying as a critical issue that needs to be explored, examined, and clearly understood because it affects both employee welfare and organizational effectiveness. More specifically, the plight of young academics should be prioritized to ensure that while they are groomed to become senior academics someday, they don't suffer irreparable mental damage, creating a vicious cycle in academia as explained by the Transactional Theory of Stress and the cognitive activation theory of stress.

The HEI should implement mental well-being strategies, such as peer support systems for junior academics, mentoring by senior academics, and workshops targeted at senior academics on bullying in the workplace. Finally, the HEI has first-hand information about WB, its consequences, and how to prevent and minimize the effects through the WB policy development. Human resources and Industrial psychology. Similar studies should be conducted using larger samples, in multi-academic institutions and also using either quantitative or mixed methods to further extrapolate this topic.

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