

# The Impact of Workplace Bullying and Harassment on Health and Well-Being of Staff in the Irish Higher Education Sector

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**Aims and Objectives:** Sectoral and institutional context(s) are critical to understanding how workplace toxicity manifests and how it might best be addressed. The education sector, specifically higher education, is the focus of this study, drawing on qualitative data collected from the Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The educational sector specifically Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), are at risk for higher than average levels of exposure. This study aimed to explore the health consequences of workplace bullying and harassment in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland.

**Objectives**

- To explore the way in which health is affected by staff in HEIs who have experienced workplace bullying and harassment, including trajectory and perceived impact
- To explore if the experience of being bullied impacts professional identity
- To explore the role of organisational context on the health impact of workplace bullying and harassment
- To explore the role of organisational processes/systems in the context of the impact on health.

**Design and Methods:** The study is a non-experimental observational study, which will employ a qualitative interpretive methodology involving one-to-one interviews with self-selecting participants. These participants are current or (recently) former members of HEI staff in Ireland, who have experienced workplace bullying and/or harassment while working in the HEI. The sample comprised self-selecting HEI staff members who have experienced workplace bullying and/or harassment, within higher education, including persons who currently work or have recently worked (thus allowing for persons who have exited their jobs due to bullying) in higher education institutions; academic staff, researchers, and professional staff, including Human Resources Professionals (HRP) and senior management. The study was open to permanent staff, precarious staff, and untenured staff. In the interests of homogeneity. Participants were recruited via social media, specifically, Twitter.

**Results:** Ten people consented to be interviewed. Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's six-step process, including the coding of data and reconstruction of codes within and across transcripts into themes. A generic thematic approach resulted in five intersecting themes, converging on one central organising construct; bullying in higher education as a traumatic process. The data displayed relationality, institutionalisation and unethicity, underlying features of the multi-faceted conceptualisation of bullying. It was concluded that the processes and procedures in place to address bullying and provide redress do not appear to be sufficiently nuanced to accommodate the complex behaviours and power plays involved in bullying in Higher Education, assuming a rationality stripped of power dynamics, which risks aggravating the damage already inflicted by bullying. The findings suggest that the institutional response, or lack thereof, can sometimes be more traumatising than the bullying itself. Individual cases often reflect a wider organisational culture that tolerates bullying and victimisation. Institutional responses will need to tackle the entire HEI ecosystem, requiring a more nuanced understanding of the power dynamics and organisational context.

**Dissemination:** A publication is under revision with the International Journal of Research in Environmental and Public Health (October 2024).