

Lab workers complain of long hours, bullying and stress

Wellcome study reveals ‘shocking portrait of research environment’

Science researchers are often subject to harassment, according to the report © Matej Kastelic/Dreamstime

Clive Cookson in London JANUARY 14 2020

Aggressive supervisors and long hours are causing very high levels of stress and insecurity among scientific researchers, according to the biggest study of laboratory working life in the UK.

The “[research culture](#)” [survey](#) of 4,200 people in the public and private sectors carried out by Wellcome, Britain’s largest charity, found that 61 per cent had witnessed — and 43 per cent personally experienced — bullying or harassment.

Almost one-third of researchers worked more than 50 hours a week, 57 per cent said there was a long-hours culture at their workplace and 48 per cent had felt pressured to work long hours.

“High workloads and long hours appear to be viewed as part and parcel of research life but their impact on researchers’ wellbeing is felt to be worsening as the demands of jobs grow and competition increases,” the report said.

“These results paint a shocking portrait of the research environment and one we must all help change,” said Jeremy Farrar, Wellcome director. “The pressures of working in research must be recognised and acted upon by all, from funders to leaders of research and heads of universities and institutions.”

“

The numbers who have experienced or witnessed harassment or bullying were so large that we have to regard the results as a damning assessment on the research system

Beth Thompson, Wellcome

Wellcome carried out the survey with research consultancy Shift Learning as part of an initiative launched last September to improve scientists’ working lives, in response to growing anecdotal evidence of bullying, harassment and stress. In 2018 the foundation [withdrew £3.5m of grant](#)

[funding](#) from Nazneen Rahman, a prominent cancer scientist, in response to allegations of bullying by staff at the Institute of Cancer Research in London.

The study included 94 in-depth interviews with a representative sample of researchers, four workshops involving 36 people and an internet survey completed by 4,200 researchers, of whom 76 per cent worked in the UK and 82 per cent were in universities.

“Participants in the online survey were self-selected but the numbers who have experienced or witnessed harassment or bullying were so large that we have to regard the results as a damning assessment on the research system and the working environment,” said Beth Thompson, who leads Wellcome’s research culture initiative.

Wellcome believes that a fundamental problem is the way “current practices prioritise outputs at all costs”. Survey participants were critical of the growing dominance of metrics — performance measures such as publications and research impact — in the careers of individual scientists and university departments. Only 14 per cent of respondents thought current metrics were having a positive effect on research, while 63 per cent of academic researchers felt pressured to meet metrics and performance indicators.

Just 37 per cent of respondents said they would feel comfortable speaking out about bullying or discrimination without fear of suffering negative personal consequences. “A feeling of not wanting to rock the boat was pervasive,” the survey report said, “and for many it was symptomatic of a culture where bullying was tolerated as long as funding and outputs remained high. Putting your head above the parapet was generally considered highly risky in terms of career implications.”

Wellcome’s plans to hold meetings at universities across the UK to discuss the study and its implications. It will then pull together ideas for improving research culture.

The survey report identified many potential solutions. One is to simplify grant applications because researchers waste vast amounts of time drawing up detailed, costed proposals that are unsuccessful. The public research councils and Wellcome typically fund 20 to 25 per cent of applications. This suggestion chimes with the government’s plan to “[reduce bureaucracy](#)” in research funding.

A priority may be to improve management training. Only 42 per cent of researchers in managerial roles had received training in managing people, and half of junior researchers had not received feedback on their performance or an appraisal during the past year.

“Changes won’t happen overnight but by working with the scientific community and making it safe for people to speak out, we can set ambitious goals to build a better research culture and as a result more impactful research,” said Sir Jeremy.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2020. All rights reserved.