

Addressing Transgressive Behaviour at Academic Institutions: data-driven insights and policy solutions

Tim Van Den Bossche^{1,2}, Dries H. Bostyn³, Femke De Backere⁴, Sean Bex⁵

(1) Department of Biomolecular Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ghent University, 9052 Ghent, Belgium

(2) VIB - UGent Center for Medical Biotechnology, VIB, 9052 Ghent, Belgium

(3) Department of Developmental, Personality, and Social Psychology, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

(4) IDLab, Department of Information Technology, Ghent University – imec, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

(5) Doctoral School, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

This manuscript has been shortened to meet journal guidelines. For the longer version, please see the original preprint version attached below.

Transgressive behaviour remains pervasive in academia, undermining the well-being and performance of early-career researchers (ECRs). Drawing on input from ECRs at Ghent University, we propose measures to build a supportive supervisory culture, improve institutional responses, and refine preventive strategies. By integrating both proactive and reactive approaches, institutions can foster healthier, more supportive academic environments globally.

Transgressive behaviour, including bullying, harassment, and abuse of power, severely impacts ECRs' mental health. A 2019 Nature survey revealed that 36% of over 6,300 ECRs sought help for anxiety or depression related to their PhD studies, highlighting the widespread prevalence of this issue¹. Additional studies from Belgium^{2,3}, the UK⁴, the US⁵ and the Netherlands⁶ have further highlighted alarming mental health challenges, with nearly half of PhD candidates in the Netherlands at risk of psychiatric disorders⁶. These findings reveal that mental health challenges remain a pervasive issue in academia^{1,7,8}. Research consistently links exposure to transgressive behaviour with deteriorating mental health⁹.

Despite the urgency, ECRs often struggle to report such behaviour, leaving issues invisible to policymakers and institutions. Unlike previous approaches that focus primarily on top-down solutions, we highlight the importance of bottom-up strategies informed directly by researchers' experiences. Drawing from roundtable discussions with 120 PhD students, we developed

actionable recommendations that have informed university-level policy changes and aim to create more supportive academic environments.

Building a supportive supervisory culture

Fostering positive and supportive relationships between PhD students and supervisors is key to preventing issues before they escalate. Clear communication at the start of the PhD about expectations, such as workload, research progress, and teaching responsibilities, is essential to prevent misunderstandings and ensure mutual understanding. Open dialogue throughout the PhD journey, supported by structured feedback mechanisms like 360° feedback, encourages continuous improvement and mutual respect. Such systems benefit students by providing guidance on research progress and supervisors by offering insights into mentoring practices.

Beyond individual interactions, institutions must actively shape a healthy supervisory culture. Investing in leadership skills of supervisors is essential, as they shape the professional environment and research culture. Structured onboarding programmes and mentoring initiatives provide new researchers with guidance, foster a sense of belonging, and help to address concerns early. To further strengthen this support system, institutions can implement process managers, mentors, or advisory committees that oversee both academic progress and well-being. These intermediaries ensure that ECRs receive balanced, structured guidance throughout their PhD, reducing the risk of interpersonal conflicts and supervisory issues escalating, ultimately fostering a supportive research culture.

Responding to misconduct

Even with strong supervisory structures, transgressive behaviour can still occur. To address such cases, institutions must ensure effective mechanisms for reporting and accountability. However, many ECRs often hesitate to use formal complaint channels, such as ombudspersons, not only due to fears of retaliation or career repercussions, but also because reporting procedures are often unclear or inaccessible. Institutions must establish reporting systems that are transparent, independent, and widely trusted to encourage early intervention and prevent issues from escalating.

A well-structured and widely communicated reporting system with clear responsibilities fosters trust and empowers ECRs to seek help. Ensuring that ombudspersons and other reporting channels are approachable and clearly defined lowers barriers to reporting. Shifting the focus from assigning blame to resolving issues constructively builds trust in institutional processes and encourages open dialogue. Importantly, while tenure should protect academic freedom, it should not shield individuals from behavioural accountability. Institutions must actively address HR dysfunctions and misconduct to safeguard both researchers' well-being and the integrity of academic environments.

Institutional learning: using reported cases to strengthen prevention

However, responding to misconduct goes beyond individual cases - it offers an opportunity to improve institutional policies and prevention. By systematically analysing reports, institutions can identify recurring issues, address policy gaps, and refine strategies. Treating cases in isolation misses the opportunity to drive broader policy improvements and foster a healthier culture.

Gathering structured feedback from ECRs through anonymised surveys and exit interviews is essential for understanding their experiences. This data allows institutions to identify common challenges and to guide leadership training for those managing ECRs. By consolidating and analysing feedback, universities can move beyond anecdotal evidence to make informed decisions, addressing systemic issues rather than reacting to isolated complaints. This data-driven approach strengthens institutional policies, leading to more effective preventive measures and a more resilient research environment.

Conclusion

Despite best efforts, transgressive behaviour continues to undermine the mental health of researchers, highlighting the urgent need for systemic change. Institutions must prioritize the lived experiences of ECRs, moving beyond reactive top-down approaches to create environments that actively protect and support researchers. Open dialogue and collaboration between ECRs and university leadership are essential to fostering healthier, more inclusive research cultures.

By implementing these recommendations, universities can address the deep-seated issues surrounding transgressive behaviour and its impact on researchers' well-being. A collective effort to share experiences and solutions across institutions is vital for meaningful progress. By shifting from crisis response to a proactive support model, academia can move toward a culture where all researchers can thrive.

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(1) Department of Biomolecular Medicine, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ghent University, 9052 Ghent, Belgium

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(4) IDLab, Department of Information Technology, Ghent University – imec, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

(5) Doctoral School, Ghent University, 9000 Ghent, Belgium

Abstract

Transgressive behaviour that negatively impacts the well-being and performance of early-career researchers (ECRs) remains pervasive in academia, undermining researchers' confidence, ability to focus and ability to fulfil their potential. This manuscript presents data-driven insights and policy recommendations based on roundtable discussions with ECRs at Ghent University. We argue that preventive measures at both the interpersonal and institutional levels, alongside reactive strategies, are critical to creating more positive, supportive, and responsive academic environments. The corresponding recommendations aim to foster a healthier, more inclusive academic culture and can be applied across institutions globally to tackle the pernicious and deep-seated issues around transgressive behaviour.

Main

Transgressive behaviour severely impacts the well-being of early career researchers (ECRs). In 2019, a survey reported that 36% of over 6,300 ECRs sought help for anxiety or depression related to their PhD studies (1). Similar findings have been observed globally. Studies in Belgium (2, 3), the UK (4), the US (5) and the Netherlands (6) have shown that many ECRs face serious mental health challenges, precipitated by negative working culture and exacerbated by inadequate support systems within academic institutions. One study found that nearly half of PhD candidates in the Netherlands were found to be at increased risk of developing psychiatric disorders (6). These statistics reveal that mental health remains a pervasive issue in academia (1, 7, 8). Transgressive behaviour, which includes bullying, harassment, and abuse of power, creates a hostile working environment that exacerbates the stress and anxiety to which ECRs are already prone, increasing their risk of developing mental health issues. Research has shown a strong correlation between exposure to such behaviour and deteriorating mental health outcomes (9).

ECRs continue to struggle with (reporting) transgressive behaviour, with little progress being made in addressing this challenge, compounding the problem by making it invisible to policymakers and university management. Unlike previous approaches that focus primarily on top-down solutions, our work highlights the importance of bottom-up approaches informed directly by the experiences of researchers. Drawing from roundtable discussions with 120 PhD students at Ghent University in late 2022, we gathered insights into best practices and recurring issues. These discussions informed policy at the university's highest decision-making level, leading to actionable recommendations aimed at creating a more effective and supportive research environment.

We share insights and recommendations in this paper that can be applied across academic institutions. These fall into three categories: (i) preventive measures at the interpersonal level, (ii) preventive measures at the institutional level, and (iii) reactive measures. While prevention is key to fostering a healthy academic environment, it often receives less attention than reactive strategies developed in response to specific crises. Preventative strategies help shape positive working environments where issues can be addressed early and do not escalate to the point where reactive strategies are required. Reactive strategies have value to the extent that institutions need robust systems to respond effectively and ensure accountability when transgressive behaviour or systemic problems arise. Clear communication about such available resources, reporting channels, and institutional responses empower ECRs to seek help when necessary and foster trust in the institution's involvement in safeguarding their well-being and professional integrity. Institutionally, each reported issue should be considered a valuable lesson which can inform preventative measures. Our findings are primarily based on the experiences of PhD students but speak more broadly to the experience of all academic staff.

Prevention at the interpersonal level: strengthening the relationship between PhD student and supervisor

Prevention at the interpersonal level begins with shaping a positive, supportive and collaborative relationship between PhD students and their supervisors. Establishing clear and open communication about expectations from the start is a vital part of this. PhD students and supervisors should agree on key aspects like workload, research progress, and teaching responsibilities as well as how they plan on working together. This mutual understanding helps prevent misunderstandings and ensures both parties have a clear framework, especially around workload distribution, which can be a common source of stress.

Maintaining this open communication throughout the PhD journey is crucial. Regular, structured feedback, such as through a 360° feedback mechanism, creates an environment of continuous improvement and mutual respect. A bidirectional approach acknowledges that both parties can benefit from insights into their performance and communication styles. For students, it provides valuable guidance on their research progress and professional development. For supervisors, it offers insights into their mentoring effectiveness and areas for improvement in their supervisory

practices. This open dialogue enables early identification of potential problems from both perspectives, allowing issues to be addressed promptly before they escalate. A key element in this approach is investing in the leadership skills of supervisors, both in their recruitment and their training. Supervisors play a critical role in shaping the professional environment, and their ability to manage both academic performance and interpersonal dynamics is crucial.

Additionally, a well-structured onboarding programme, which helps new researchers integrate into their academic community, is a critical first step. It provides new starters with essential information, it connects new ECRs with their peers, fosters a sense of belonging, and frames a researcher's initial engagement with their supervisors with the regulations, norms and expectations established by the institution. Mentoring programmes, where new ECRs are paired with more experienced colleagues, offer informal support by providing guidance, practical advice, and early intervention to address concerns. These support structures are part of the baseline infrastructure institutions must have in place to create supportive environments for ECRs.

To strengthen this preventive approach, institutions can create additional support layers through process managers, mentors, or doctoral advisory committees. These systems provide ongoing support and act as intermediaries, giving PhD students a resource for advice or intervention when necessary. Having neutral parties oversee the academic progress as well as well-being reduces the risk of the latter being overlooked and thereby undermining the former

Prevention at the institutional level

Prevention at the institutional level requires a proactive approach, where universities not only focus on reacting to individual cases but also on identifying patterns of recurring issues and taking steps to learn from them and apply those lessons in developing future policies. Reported issues and incidents should be considered data in a process of continuous policy improvement focused on fostering a more positive academic culture rather than isolated incidents requiring a unique and tailored response.

Insights gathered in this way can be used to shape training for those involved in managing ECRs, helping them to address common challenges such as workload management and personal conflicts early on as part of their routine work as leaders rather than experiencing those challenges as unexpected, unique, and ultimately overwhelming to the point where they trigger more extensive conflicts. Gathering honest feedback from ECRs is another essential component of institutional prevention. Exit interviews and anonymised surveys offer valuable insights into the experiences of ECRs. Currently, much feedback shared in committees is anecdotal, limiting the ability to fully understand institutional challenges. By anonymising and consolidating data from these feedback mechanisms, universities can create a clearer picture of recurring issues and areas in need of improvement. Sharing this data regularly with university leadership and ECR representatives allows for more informed discussions and targeted interventions.

Continuously collecting and analysing this data is essential to moving beyond anecdotal evidence and addressing systemic issues in a meaningful way. Relying too heavily on individual experiences can obscure broader trends within the institution and makes it impossible to distinguish between unacceptable behaviour by outliers and systemic issues in the working culture requiring a broader response. By gathering feedback from a diverse range of ECRs, institutions can better identify and address these systemic issues, refine policies, and strengthen preventive measures.

Reactive measures

Reactive measures retain their importance in addressing the unacceptable behaviour of outliers as well as establishing accountability more broadly for disrespecting the boundaries the institution has set. The challenge for ECRs here often centres on the credibility and accessibility of the reporting channels which trigger reactive measures. Formal complaint channels, such as faculty ombudsmen, can feel high-threshold for ECRs due to their vulnerable position within the academic hierarchy. Many hesitate to raise concerns out of fear of reprisals or harm to their careers. To address this, institutions must honestly review reporting channels to assess their accessibility, independence and the extent to which they are trusted. This means reviewing processes to the point where reports are seen to be taken seriously and acted upon without jeopardising those who make reports. This encourages early reporting at a stage where intervention is most likely to be successful and thereby prevents issues from escalating or going unnoticed.

A clear hierarchical structure for addressing concerns raised in this way is vital. In many cases, the reporting framework is unclear, leaving ECRs uncertain about where to turn when problems arise. A transparent reporting system, with clearly assigned responsibilities at every level, allows issues to be escalated and addressed efficiently. This clarity is especially important in institutions where the hierarchy can already make ECRs feel vulnerable, as it provides them with a clear, reliable path for seeking help without the uncertainty that can increase feelings of powerlessness.

How institutions handle complaints is also crucial to fostering a healthy academic culture. Shifting the focus from assigning blame to resolving issues promotes constructive problem-solving and builds trust in institutional processes. When complaints are approached through a punitive lens, it discourages open dialogue and cooperation. By encouraging early reporting and viewing those reports as an opportunity to reset individual relationships and address systemic problems, the likelihood of meaningful resolutions is drastically increased. This fosters an environment where researchers feel comfortable raising concerns, knowing that the goal is improvement, not punishment. Importantly, while tenure is a key tool in protecting academic freedom, it should not stand in the way of institutions addressing HR dysfunctions or holding individuals accountable for misconduct as doing so ultimately undermines the academic work such individuals conduct and oversee.

Conclusion

Despite best efforts, transgressive behaviour remains a persistent issue in academic institutions. Ghent University has taken important steps to address these challenges and continues to iterate and recalibrate its approach. Universities worldwide can benefit from sharing experiences and learning from one another's approaches even if doing so requires the honesty and courage to own up to our failings as institutions to address this issue. The consistent data on the decline in researchers' mental health and the impact this has on their ability to conduct their work makes it crucial for this issue to remain a point of focus within the academic community. A key takeaway from our findings is the need to involve ECRs in shaping solutions. By ensuring that solutions incorporate the lived experiences of those most impacted, institutions can move beyond reactive top-down approaches driven by individual cases and foster positive working environments that support and, where necessary, protect ECRs. An open dialogue and collaboration throughout the policy process which includes those instances where problems have occurred allows academic institutions to continuously evolve in their pursuit of a healthier, more inclusive culture for all.

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