School of Physics 'Bullying' Survey (October 2018)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The School of Physics established a Physics Equity and Access Committee (PEAC) in 2014. The PEAC plays an important role in the School to ensure a fair and equitable workplace and to provide support to staff and students. In 2014 and in 2015, PEAC conducted surveys of the School of Physics and Alumni to better understand the culture and working environment in the School. One goal of those surveys was to identify unacceptable behaviour and attitudes so action could be taken to ensure the School is a welcoming and supportive workplace. The School aims to create an environment where all staff and students feel accepted, safe, and able to achieve their full potential.

The survey considered in this report was conducted to focus specifically on the issue of unacceptable bullying behaviour. The stated goals of this survey were to:

1. identify the extent of any bullying behaviour within the School
2. determine who was being impacted by bullying behaviour and the severity of this impact
3. examine how different cohorts within the School have experienced bullying behaviour
4. define new strategies to prevent bullying behaviour and…
5. …take action where necessary and possible.

The survey was conducted over two weeks to 15 October 2018. The survey defined bullying as,

> "repeated and unreasonable behaviour (behaviour that a reasonable person, having considered the circumstances, would see as unreasonable, including behaviour that is victimising, humiliating, intimidating or threatening) directed towards a worker or a group of workers that creates a risk to health and safety."

The survey comprised 22 multiple-choice questions and 3 open text questions. Each multiple-choice question also allowed open text comments so participants could provide additional context. The survey sections were: Demographic, School Position / Level, Incidence of Bullying, Response to Bullying, Self-Reflection about Bullying, and Suggestions to Decrease Bullying. The full survey questions and response options are provided as an appendix.

The quantitative and qualitative data from the survey were analysed by an independent expert from the School of Psychology. This ensured the anonymity of the participants was maintained and the analyses were conducted dispassionately. A range of statistical analyses were conducted to address the goals of the survey. Owing to the nature of the questions and responses, only certain types of statistical analyses were possible.

The results were analysed by School position and level according to the following nomenclature:

- 'Students': are mainly domestic and international post-graduate students along with 11 undergraduate students.
- 'Academic Staff' are post-doctoral/fellows as well as contracted, continuing, and retired/honorary academics (but not Students who might be employed as tutors).
- 'Post-doctoral Staff' are only those who categorised themselves as 'postdoctoral employee or fellow' in the survey.
- 'Professional Staff' are only those who identified as such in the survey; i.e. these are non-Academic Staff.
- 'Staff' refers to all non-Student staff i.e. both Professional Staff and Academic Staff combined.
- 'Junior Staff' are Academic (levels A, B, C) and Professional Staff (levels 3 - 6) who identified themselves in the lower appointment levels. The junior academic staff includes Post-doctoral Staff.
- 'Senior Staff' are Academic (levels D, E) and Professional Staff (levels 7 and above) who identified themselves in the higher appointment levels. The senior academic staff does not include any Post-doctoral Staff.

Other nomenclature:

- 'Bullying experiences / experiences of being bullied': relate to question 11 '*Have you personally experienced bullying in the School of Physics in the last 12 months?*'
- 'Bullying observations / direct observations of bullying': relate to responses to question 17 '*Have you directly observed bullying of somebody else in the School in the last 12 months?*'
- 'Bullying reports / receiving reports of bullying': relate to responses to question 18 '*Has bullying been reported to you by someone in the School over the last 12 months?*'
- 'Bullying behaviour / bullying event': a collective term for the three bullying-related terms above.
- 'Risk Factors': were defined from questions in the survey (e.g. gender, age, religion) and were typically hypothesised to be directional so as to categorise those who might be…
- 'High-Risk': at higher (or different - depending on the analysis) risk of experiencing bullying (e.g. female, younger, religious)
- 'Low-Risk': at lower or (or different - depending on the analysis) risk of experiencing bullying (e.g. male, older, non-religious)
- 'Pushing people' refers to item 21 of the survey, which asks respondents whether they agree that, '*because the academic world is concerned with the pursuit of excellence, it is acceptable to "push" people in a way that could be considered "bullying" in another context.*'

Risk factors considered:

The following risk factors (high risk) for experiencing bullying were derived from the survey and considered in the analyses:

- Age (Under 40)
- Gender (Not Male)
- Ethnicity (Non-Anglo)
- Religion (Religious)
- English Fluency (Non-Native Speaker)
- Migration Status (<10 Years)
- Medical / Disability Status (Yes)
- Sexuality (Non-Heterosexual)
- Position in 'hierarchy'
    - (Students) - Staff
    - (Post-Doctoral) - Other Staff
    - Juniority as (Junior Professional & Academic Staff) - Senior Professional & Academic Staff

The findings in relation to the overall incidence of bullying behaviour:

The survey centred on the incidence of bullying behaviours i.e. did participants report: personal experiences of being bullied, direct observations of bullying, or receiving reports of bullying in the 12 months to October 2018. The response options for the three relevant survey items were, 'Yes', 'No', 'Not Sure', and 'Prefer not to say'. Throughout this report, the 'Yes' and 'Not Sure' responses for these (and some other) items have been grouped together. The independent expert's rationale for doing so was:

- the stated focus of the survey was *"…on the issue of bullying, to identify if this is a problem within the School, who might be affected, and how different cohorts within the School have experienced this unacceptable behaviour."*
- the reasoning that a 'Not Sure' response was more likely to indicate the risk of undesirable behaviour than a 'No' response.
- combining the responses errs on the side of including data that is indicative of problems / issues in statistical analyses that are more advanced than a frequency table of responses.
- all of the participants who responded 'Not Sure' to the item about having personally experienced bullying also reported some 'Severity of Impact' of the bullying experience in the subsequent item.

Using this approach, in the 139 responses to the survey, there were 21 bullying experiences, 28 bullying observations, and 25 bullying reports. The incidence of bullying experiences in the survey sample was 15%.

When interpreting these results, it is useful to keep in mind that the survey is unlikely to be a complete record of actual bullying instances in the School. Furthermore, it is likely that some of the instances reported in this survey would not have been found to involve bullying were they to have been investigated. Finally, the survey design does not enable us to determine the extent of overlap between these three types of bullying events e.g. one person's experience of bullying might have been observed by another person and reported to a third person.

The findings in relation to experiences, observations, and reports of bullying:

- Bullying was largely a staff-on-staff issue. Students were less likely to experience bullying than any type or level of Staff.
- 80% of Staff who experienced bullying had at least one Risk Factor (e.g. being female or non-Anglo or younger than 40 years old etc).
- Female participants and religious participants were more likely to experience bullying than their male or non-religious counterparts.
- Being female or being under 40 years old predicted a significant increase in the likelihood of experiencing bullying.
- The severity of the impact of bullying experiences was far greater for those with a disability or medical condition than those without. Qualitative analysis suggested that those with mental health issues, which might not be obvious to others in the way that physical disabilities would be, are especially vulnerable to suffering severe impacts from bullying experiences.
- The severity of impact was somewhat worse for younger participants than for older and somewhat worse for Anglo participants than for non-Anglo.
- Academic Staff were far more likely than any other position or level in the School to be named as the perpetrator of a bullying experience.
- Almost all bullying experiences were perpetrated by a line manager or someone in a higher position than the person being bullied.
- Qualitative analysis suggested that one experience of bullying recorded by the survey was perpetrated by someone outside of the School and that…
    - bullying behaviour ranges from incidents that might be considered subjectively less-serious (one's work receiving increased scrutiny; coercion; flippant comments) to very serious (obvious aggression and explicit threats) and that…
    - only in a small number of cases did bullying seem be directly related to a Risk Factor (gender, disability etc) and that…
    - according to some participants, senior academics display behaviours that are perceived as bullying: this included one mention of the Head of School displaying such behaviours.

In relation to actions ('report it' or 'act on it themselves') to deal with bullying:

- Participants higher in the school hierarchy were more likely to report bullying or act on it themselves.
- Those who think academia involves 'pushing' people to excel were less likely to report bullying.

- Females were more likely than males to report bullying.
- Participants of non-Anglo ethnicity were less likely to report bullying.
- Nearly a quarter of participants did not report or act on experiencing, observing, or receiving reports of bullying and…
  - this was most often out of uncertainty about what to do or concern for the consequences for themselves and…
  - qualitative analysis suggested that even those who experienced a severe impact from a bullying experience might not have reported it for these reasons.
- Qualitative analysis also suggested that some cases of bullying have been 'ignored' by the School when the perpetrator had a high status.

In relation to the belief that 'pushing' people to achieve high standards in academia is more acceptable than in other contexts where it could be considered bullying:

- Participants who had been in Australia longer than 10 years were more likely than recent migrants to hold this belief.
- Students were more likely than Staff to hold this belief.
- Amongst Staff, non-heterosexual Staff were more likely than heterosexual Staff to hold this belief.
- Qualitative analysis suggested that the setting of performance expectations that are perceived as unreasonable / time-management and challenging feedback about performance might be the source of some of the bullying behaviours recorded in the survey.

In relation to self-reported risk of bullying:

- Participants under 40 years old and Senior Staff (Levels: D-E or 7+) reported a higher risk of their own behaviour being perceived as bullying or possibly having bullied someone.

In relation to suggestions for improvement:

- Only 28% of participants thought no change was needed, whereas 29% suggested that culture change was required and 43% that current policies needed increased enforcement.
- Qualitative analysis suggested
  - quite strongly from several participants that there was a culture of lack of accountability for those who perpetrated bullying, that it was well-known who the repeat perpetrators were, and that clear action with tangible consequences for the perpetrators needed to occur. Some noted that this was true broadly of the University of Sydney as well as in the School.
  - online training modules were seen as inadequate and that more purposeful actions were required such as: lectures, regular discussions, training for academics, training on reporting procedures, social media use training, and regular check-ins by senior leaders to track progress.
  - individuality and diversity of approach ought not to be excuses for bullying-type behaviour.
  - a certain amount of staff / student segregation by ethnicity has been noticed and some commented on racist elements in the School.

The recommendations based on the results of the survey are:

- Conduct further qualitative discussions / focus groups with High-Risk groups - especially women, those of faith, and those under 40 years old to understand the situations in which they feel uncomfortable and…
  - ensure that they and others - especially non-Anglo people know that there will be confidential and supportive ways of raising their concerns
- Focus diversity and other training on Academic Staff who are - or will be - in positions of seniority or management.
- Make available to those in the School a clear and simple a definition of bullying behaviour. Also make available examples of alternative behaviours for people to express in times of frustration, disagreement, or conflict.
- Set expectations about behaviour and consequences for transgressions - make these 'public' and enforce them.
- Applying to staff-staff relationships the mindsets that have been successful to reduce incidence of bullying of Students e.g. awareness of power differences in relationships between Staff and Students.
- Interventions that target the mindset of 'pushing' people in the pursuit of excellence. These might include developing staff skills for:
  - setting high standards and providing encouragement, support, and feedback in a way that increases motivation to achieve them
  - encouraging, supporting, and rewarding highly competent people and high performers
  - identifying and addressing mental health and well-being issues
  - identifying potential differences in perceptions due to differences in culture, power or hierarchy etc
- Explore the prevalence amongst Students of the mindset of 'pushing' people in the pursuit of excellence, given that some of them will likely become Staff.
- Consider doing a simple training needs analysis with Staff to identify the specific leadership and interpersonal skills they need e.g. having performance related conversations without the risk of perceived bullying.