

Article Info



Article Type:
Letter to Editor



Scarcity of lab positions in high-ranked institutions creates a breeding ground for bullies

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According to the concept of market equilibrium, the only fair condition for both buyers and sellers is when there is neither excess demand nor excess supply. If not in the equilibrium condition, one of the parties is forced to enter the exchange, receiving less of the service/product they desire.

This disequilibrium condition exists in the case of students/scholars who are eager to work in institutions/labs (demand) as compared to the number of open positions (supply). The higher number of applicants compared to the open positions provides a fertile ground for the emergence of bullying behaviors. This is mainly because the “willingness to tolerate” abuse from leading scientists will be automatically increased as lab members can easily be replaced by other eager candidates. For the same reason, the “willingness to bully” or other abusive behaviors by leaders may increase. The risk of this condition is minimized in institutions in which the number of positions is equal or less than the number of applicants, meaning the more prestigious the institution, the higher the possibility of bullying.

Unfortunately, although high-ranked institutions may believe in the fairness of their investigations of bullying,^{1,2,3} both their actions against bullies and their sympathy/compensation toward targets may be inadequate/unfair for many reasons including the fear of reputation damage and the possibility of being sued by the targets.^{3,4} Although the current legal options against academic bullying are limited,⁵ we believe that routine, robust, and serious monitoring of bullying behaviors of any kind in these institutions, possibly by an independent global

committee,¹ can minimize the chance of long-term and intense bullying behaviors, which in turn benefits both targets and institutions. Such regular monitoring by institutions sends a signal to the bullies that they are being watched; it also is a signal to students/researchers that the environment is safe for them and that they do not need to tolerate abuse in the lab.

Funding sources

None.

Ethical Statement

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Morteza Mahmoudi is the founder and director of the Academic Parity Movement, a non-profit organization born out of a need for justice, and the protection of students' most basic human rights within academic institutions (paritymovement.org).

Authors' contribution

All authors are equally contributed to the paper.

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Received: 12 Oct. 2019, Accepted: 12 Oct. 2019, ePublished: 23 Oct. 2019



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