

Report on HAREA Survey on Sexual Harassment at the ANU

A questionnaire on sexual harassment was included in the last HAREA newsletter. A total of 50 responses have been received. Of those, quite a few respondents added comments congratulating HAREA on its efforts to bring the subject "out of the closet" and we have also been encouraged to learn that in a few departments the subject was raised in serious discussion following the arrival of the newsletter. The purpose of the questionnaire was, from the beginning, a "consciousness-raising" exercise, a catalyst for thought and discussion, as well as effort to find out the prevalence and awareness of the problem among HAREA members.

We cannot claim that the responses received are representative because of the small number involved, but we think it may be of interest to the membership at large to know the opinions and experiences of those responsible and concerned members who replied.

The definition of sexual harassment in the workplace is very difficult given the subjective and personal nature of the experience. A working definition might be: sexual attentions that are unwanted, repeated and affect a person's job. The USA Civil Rights Act of 1964 defines sexual harassment at length as:

"requests for sexual favours and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature (which become) sexual harassment when (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of an individual's employment; or (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual's work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment."

The survey respondents defined sexual harassment in a variety of ways which most frequently included notions of: sexuality; power relations; invasion of privacy; aggression; and manipulation. One person described it as "anything that makes me feel uncomfortable" and another described its practice as a "classic no-win situation". The fact is that sexual harassment will mean different things to different people depending on a variety of personality and experiential factors.

Of the total respondents, two replied that they had felt like leaving their jobs because of persistent sexual harassment.

The majority of the respondents thought that sexual harassment happens to "only a few people" at the ANU, but many thought that "it happens to a fair number of people". Naturally, such assessments as these, and others in the questionnaire, were closely related to the breadth of definition of sexual harassment given by each respondent at the beginning.

Over half the respondents indicated that they had been subjected to sexual harassment at the ANU, in the majority of cases in the form of "sexual remarks or teasing", but many also indicated "staring or leering", "touching, brushing against, or grabbing", and "sexually suggestive objects or pictures in the workplace". None of the respondents had experienced "more serious forms of sexual assault". Although not explicitly included in the questionnaire, quite a few reported sexual harassment in jobs prior to being employed at the ANU.

The sexual harassment came from, in order of importance: work colleagues, immediate superior, higher management, academic staff.

In the majority of cases the behaviour was ignored, although some told the harasser to stop. One person complained to the person's superior, and one person tried to get a transfer.

The person who reported the behaviour to a superior was initially told she was a troublemaker, but eventually, after corroborating evidence was received, action was taken. Another person, who reported sexual harassment of another individual was labelled a troublemaker. Other studies have shown that when cases of sexual harassment are dealt with at administrative level, it is usually the victim who is transferred and the victim only who is counselled!

The reactions to sexual harassment amongst respondents were, in order of importance: feeling angry, feeling self-conscious about one's appearance, feeling powerless, feeling guilty, feeling frightened. Three people felt their job performance suffered, and one experienced health problems.

Of those who reported sexual harassment the majority were female, married, age 30 - 39, and in clerical work. The other major job categories affected were research assistants, secretaries and lab technicians.

The replies received indicate that sexual harassment does indeed occur on the ANU campus and it also seems clear to us that there is room for improvement in the current ad hoc grievance procedures. To this end, a meeting was held on 2nd June attended by representatives from the Health and Counselling Services, students, research students, overseas students, Women on Campus, and HAREA. The committee is in the process of formulating a more satisfactory set of procedures to deal with sexual harassment. The HAREA sub-committee will keep you posted on developments.

We welcome any further responses to the questionnaire, or any further comments or suggestions concerning what should be done about sexual harassment by HAREA.

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