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Sent: 07 August 2020 08:53
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Subject: Current Status of the UCU Work on Bullying and Harassment in the School of Veterinary Studies

Sent on behalf of reps working on this issue. Please direct any comments/questions to ucu@ed.ac.uk

Background

Following our own investigation we found:

- An intolerable breach of basic health and safety standards in aggressive and abusive language and physical behaviour, particularly from a particular staff that we shall not name in this communication.
- Shocking levels of harassment leading to many staff taking leave due to stress.
- Long-term members of staff leaving due to feeling marginalised, harassed and eventually bullied out of their jobs.
- Unacceptably high workloads on remaining staff due in part to long-term staff leaving and absence due to stress.
- Negligible faith in the impartiality of human resources when dealing with complaints.
- Negligible faith in the impartiality of recruitment and promotion processes.
- A culture of extreme fear of being labelled as a troublemaker.
- The use of disciplinary procedures, marginalisation, and unprofessional conduct against those labelled troublemakers, or those who question inappropriate behaviour of management.

In an effort to improve conditions we initially requested that:

- Senior management be given training on bullying and harassment.
- The Head of School would be a position that comes with a strict term limit.
- A new body be created, the role of which would be to improve the working culture on the campus on an ongoing basis. This body would involve the views of staff and would be well resourced.

Following consultation with management it was agreed that:

- New training would be provided. We have since been told this has not been done, but training is currently being converted into an online version. We have been assured that the position of the Head of School already comes with a strict term limit in line with the published process.
- No new body to improve culture has been created thus far.
- An independent external agency (Intersol) would be appointed to establish the extent of the issues raised through conducting safe space interviews with staff. This report has been created and shared with the union and a summarised version has been given to those who took part. It was agreed the

report would not be shared with the wider membership. The nature of Intersol's involvement was a matter of a good deal of negotiation in order to provide the most useful information and to protect the anonymity of participants.

The Intersol Report

It was agreed with management that the report by the external agency would not be shared more widely. We intend to honour that agreement. In general terms it did however add weight to each of our initial claims.

Management indicated that while the claims in the report were serious, the size of the sample of participants meant that the findings were not robust, and that it intends to obtain a fuller picture by conducting an online survey of all staff, to be designed, run and analysed by Intersol.

It is the position of the union that even if one person is making these claims, action should be taken, and that most of our initial requests are simply good practice and should not even require a single complaint for them to be implemented.

It is well recognised that the health care professions and health care sector, both human and veterinary, have been very hierarchical and that this has made changing cultures and challenging mistakes, inappropriate behaviour and issues such as bullying and harassment very difficult. The development of approaches such as Intelligent Kindness recognises that healthcare culture needs to change so that it reflects the fundamental principles of community. The development of Project Lift, NHS Scotland's new recruitment process for leaders further evidences the critical importance placed on kindness, dignity and compassion (the three values at the heart of Scotland's National Performance Framework) in recruiting leaders who can nurture and deliver a sense of community and collaborative working. The UCU recognises that these approaches need to be emphasised more in the institutions that train the vets and doctors of the future and that the job descriptions of Heads of School and senior management within the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, here at the University of Edinburgh, need to recognise this explicitly.

Going forward

A New Staff Survey

Management have decided to use an independent external agency to work on a survey for all staff at the School of Veterinary with a view to confirm or reject the findings of the previous Intersol report. While we agree it is good practice to gauge the views of staff, this should not be a precondition to action. At a minimum we would expect:

- That the survey is carried out by Intersol Global
- Participants should be anonymous and face no repercussions for taking part.
- That the survey focusses very specifically on the eight issues noted in their report with an opportunity given for staff to identify where in the School they believe any problems to lie and who they hold responsible for causing those problems.

- That the survey is completed, analysed and reported upon by mid-August
- That the summary findings of the report, and any remedial actions proposed by UoE, are made publicly available to all staff of RD(S)VS

The only one of these expectations that management has indicated difficulty with is that the survey will not be completed by mid-August due to covid-19 related delays.

Focus Groups

We have been informed of a group of staff from outside the union have organised a series of focus groups with a view to improving the working culture. All indications are that this process has been well considered and so we welcome this and encourage members to participate. Indeed, this body could play a role similar to our initial demand of a well-resourced body that looks into working culture on an ongoing basis.

Work still to be done

It is still the position of the union that not enough action is being taken on this issue. A large amount of effort and time has been spent investigating an issue for which action could have been taken without any evidence of wrong doing being required. Training for senior management on bullying and harassment has still not been given many months after it was first requested. This was the simplest of all our requests and we are frustrated that even this has not been provided. Management have indicated that part of this delay is due to covid-19.

A well-resourced body to improve working conditions on an ongoing basis has yet to be set up. While we are pleased that new focus groups will be taking place, and the opinions of staff will be gauged in a new survey, however the findings of this cannot be a precondition to action.

If anyone is experiencing bullying or harassment in the workplace it is important you contact your union as early as possible, even if you do not want to pursue any further action yet. While this is our preferred method of dealing with these issues we do also want to highlight that the university has a whistle-blower policy as well that allows reporting of inappropriate behaviour be that bullying or any illegal activity, anonymously if wished. This does however come with some limitations in terms of the ability to follow up on claims, and it is important to remember that vexatious claims should not be made.

As a union we are committed to continuing our work to improve conditions, however we must report that progress has been frustratingly slow and more action is needed in the very short term.