

This letter is intended to address the failings of management to appropriately handle multiple cases of sexual misconduct and harassment, both recently and historically, and the emerging culture around these issues. It also outlines suggestions for improvements to the system, to ensure the Blizzard institute is a safe place to work. If you agree with the points below, and would like to support this open letter, please sign using the following link:

<https://forms.gle/DRe7aGgtfhHXBnb9>

The number of signatures will be indicated at the bottom of the letter, but signatories will be kept anonymous as of 19/01/2024. The number of signatures is reflective of this time point. For an up to date number, please access the letter through the link:

[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1P\\_urX\\_jmQimujgtSAsDfJWED6J\\_3FY1s8HNWy5rNIJk/e\\_dit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1P_urX_jmQimujgtSAsDfJWED6J_3FY1s8HNWy5rNIJk/e_dit?usp=sharing)

**List of initial recipients – received 20.12.2023**

Adina Michael-Titus - Neuroscience Centre Lead  
Adrian Martineau - Immunobiology Centre Lead  
Chris Shelley - Director of Student Experience  
Christina Govier - Policy and Campaigns Manager for Sexual Harassment  
Colin Bailey - President and Principal  
David Kelsell - CBCR Centre Lead  
Inderjeet Dokal - Genomics and Child Health Centre Lead  
Kenneth Linton - Director of Graduate Studies  
Mary Collins - Blizzard Institute Director  
Natalie McCloskey - Institute Manager  
Nawaz Ahmed - Blizzard Education Manager  
Serena-Amani Al Jabbar - QMSU President  
Stephanie Marshall - VP for Education  
Tim Warner - Dean for Postgraduate Research and Director Doctoral College  
William Alazawi - Director of Research

If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this letter, please know that support is available for you at QMUL, for more information visit:

<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/welfare/sexual-harassment-advice/>

## **Open Letter Addressing the Management of Cases of Sexual Harassment and Assault within the Blizzard Institute**

This open letter addresses the atmosphere created by management towards cases of sexual harassment and sexual assault, and specifically, the culture widely experienced by victims at the Blizzard Institute.

There is an incipient dismissive culture regarding the management of cases of sexual harassment within the Blizzard which is severely impacting both research culture and staff/student welfare. This primarily stems from a systemic failure in protecting, supporting, and respecting victims. The behaviour of management diminishes the voice and experience of the victim as a subject of sexual harassment. Furthermore, there is substantial emphasis on the protection of the perpetrator and, in some cases, their promotion; victims have not been guaranteed similar protection. We hereby write asking for reassessment and change in management's approach to dealing with victims of sexual harassment. We urgently request the implementation of a firm infrastructure, training scheme, and the development of policies to ensure the safeguarding of a victim's privacy, safety, and dignity.

### **1. Failure of the Protection System:**

There is a substantial failure in the existing system designed to protect students and staff from the trauma of sexual assault. Victims are repeatedly encountering obstacles that prevent them from coming forward. For example, for a formally reported case, it takes 6-12 months for any action to be taken. This existing system is therefore perpetuating a culture of silence and fear. We urge an in-depth review of the current reporting mechanisms and outcomes to ensure management provides a safe and supportive environment for victims to seek help without fear of reprisal.

### **2. Culture of Victim Blaming and Protection of Perpetrators:**

A widespread, concerning culture of victim-blaming and protection of perpetrators has emerged. There have been several cases recently which are a prime example of this. This not only perpetuates the idea that allegations aren't taken seriously, but also undermines the trust and confidence in senior management and the reporting system. Consequently, and understandably, there is a reluctance on the part of students and staff to report incidents. We call for a re-evaluation of our institutional values and a commitment to prioritising the well-being of victims over professional reputations.

### **3. Lack of Consequences and Repeat Offences:**

Allegations are not consistently being taken seriously, leading to a lack of consequences for perpetrators. This failure to address the issue head-on contributes to a cycle of repeat offences. It is imperative that a comprehensive and swift response is implemented to break this cycle and hold perpetrators accountable for their actions.

#### **4. Lack of Awareness, Training and Effective Resolutions:**

There is an evident lack of awareness and training amongst staff regarding how to handle sexual assault allegations with empathy, sensitivity, and confidence. Existing inappropriate suggestions from management to provide safety for victims include: victims moving to different working spaces (e.g. the library) for desk work or different working hours for lab work and thereby isolating the victim from their peers, and proposing (over)sharing of information regarding the victim with perpetrators. This is creating an unsafe working environment in which perpetrators face little consequence, which, in some cases, has allowed them to continue perpetuating abuse. Additionally, this actively places the burden of labour on the victim to ensure their own safety. Instead of being protective of the victim, these 'solutions' are instead discriminatory against them. This is an example of victim blaming.

There is a fundamental lack of awareness as to the role of employment hierarchy and power dynamics in academic research, and the impact sexual advances have on individuals in this context which may lead to sexual misconduct. Additionally, there is a lack of appreciation of the fear of consequences experienced by victims reporting and the subsequent impact senior staff can have on the future careers of early career researchers. Victims have also experienced their names being shared in casual conversation by members of management, therefore removing the confidentiality that should be afforded to all victims. This behaviour additionally highlights a lack of appreciation of the consequences and an absence of confidentiality from the perpetrator. Victims are sworn to confidentiality, something that perpetrators are not reciprocating. This is an untenable and unacceptable approach towards victims of sexual harassment; it repeatedly nullifies the severity of the subject matter and is tantamount to victim-blaming. This is creating an unsafe working environment which is detrimental to research culture and student morale.

**We hereby call for four actions.**

##### **1. Mandatory In-Person Training:**

We propose mandatory, in-person training sessions for all students and staff on consent, sexual misconduct, and proper response procedures. Additionally, there should be increased awareness about the support available to alleged victims and guidelines on providing meaningful assistance during investigations. This training should be a recurring requirement to reinforce awareness and optimise responsiveness.

##### **2. Clear Reporting Guidelines:**

Develop and disseminate clear, step-by-step guidelines outlining the official reporting procedures and alternative options available to victims. This should include interim support measures that can be implemented while an official investigation is ongoing.

##### **3. Failure to Comply with Victim Safeguarding:**

Given the serious level of responsibility that supervisors, senior management, and other roles within the university structure have, we propose a three-strike rule to ensure that those in a position of care continue to deliver the appropriate support and compliance with reporting

guidelines. A strike constitutes a failure to comply with outlined procedures, or an inappropriate response to a sexual assault or misconduct disclosure, as outlined above. In the first instance, the member of staff must be referred to mandatory training, and no additional students can be supervised until this is completed. If there is a second failure to comply, the staff member must have a meeting with senior management to ensure they understand the responsibility and level of care expected of them within their professional role. Upon a third failure, the staff member must be removed from their role in which safeguarding should be implicit. They have repeatedly failed to provide the support and care expected from them and are therefore no longer suitable for their given role.

**4. Clear guidelines around hierarchy and power dynamics in romantic relationships – amended for clarity 19.01.2024:**

This measure aims to ensure that relationships are consensual, there is an awareness of and freedom from power dynamics, and to mitigate potential conflicts arising from false declarations. Current QMUL guidelines should be highlighted regarding staff/student relationships, and clear and specific training on the impact of hierarchy within consent should be clearly disseminated within the staff and student in-person training (see point 1). Ongoing discussion should be held between appropriate members of staff surrounding feasibility and applicability of a declaration portal for relationships which exist between pay-grades, however this conversation must involve representation from the LGBTQ+ community and awareness of the possibility of discrimination.

In conclusion, it is crucial to restore faith in senior management responsible for responding to these allegations. This involves a commitment to responding with care, sincerity, empathy, sensitivity, and discretion, ensuring that justice is served without compromise. Every person should expect to be safe and respected within a work environment. Every person should have the unassailable right to voice concerns about sexual harassment without apprehension of legal repercussions, derogatory commentary, or analogous forms of retaliation, fostering an environment that upholds the principles of openness, accountability, and respect. We believe that by addressing these concerns and implementing the suggested improvements, we can create an environment that prioritises the safety, well-being, and dignity of every member of our community. It is the only effective way to progress a positive research culture.

We politely require a public response from management in the new year, regarding the culture discussed above, and our subsequent action points.

Number of Signatures	57
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