

# Advice for staff supporting researchers facing harassment

Beyond practical steps to ensure the researcher's safety and wellbeing, responses to reports of online harassment must **build and maintain trust** between the researcher and their institution.

A well-coordinated and thoughtful approach can reassure researchers that they are not facing the abuse alone. Below are key principles to help support staff respond effectively and build confidence in their systems.

## ■ Expert-led support:

Take responsibility for risk-assessment and knowing what measures could improve the researcher's safety and well-being. It can be difficult for people to express their needs or know what to do in moments of heightened stress, so outlining their options and working together to make a plan can help them feel reassured and regain a sense of control.

Some researchers may not feel that they need support services. A risk assessment system should determine when actions should be strongly recommended or required.

- **A coordinated response:** Establish a single point of contact to liaise with staff involved in the response to avoid placing the burden of organisation on the individual facing harassment. A fragmented response can exacerbate stress for the individual and reduce trust that their institution will effectively support and protect them.

- **Clear processes and expectations:** When the response requires the researcher to do something, provide a clear explanation of what is needed and why.

Communicate the limits of the institution's support services, such as when the institution is and isn't responsible for the researcher's safety, when the researcher may need to seek external support, and to what extent the institution can provide advice and assistance around accessing external support.

- **Moral support:** Victims need to be taken seriously and have their emotional response validated by those involved in support efforts. Avoid 'outsourcing' the expression of emotional support to mental health service providers—all staff involved in the response should be able to communicate with empathy and care. Tips for talking to a researcher under attack are available [here](#).

Sometimes, excessive check-ins and outpourings of support - particularly from people with whom the researcher has no existing relationship - can be overwhelming, and the researcher may feel like they need to overcompensate with reassurance that they are okay. This is a form of emotional labour that can add to stress. Be considerate and follow the individual's lead.

## RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES

"Having someone take an hour out of their day just to listen was the most helpful thing I experienced - it got me through the day and helped me feel empowered to stand up for myself."

## RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES

"My stress levels dropped immediately when I received a short email from senior leadership reassuring me that the University supported me, my student and our work."

- **Avoid victim blaming and advocating non-solutions.** Campaigns of intimidation and harassment are designed to silence expert voices. Telling victims to “ignore the trolls” or “get offline” can amplify this harm, and imply that the abuse is a consequence of how they conduct themselves online.

For many researchers, digital engagement is central to their professional identity and community, and some may find empowerment in publicly addressing the abuse. Measures such as taking breaks from social media and locking down accounts may be beneficial, but these should be presented as options, not as default recommendations.

#### RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES

“I spent a decade building a following on social media and writing in the public domain to share my work. When my institution told me to simply get offline and ignore the trolls, it felt like a slap in the face. When you tell us to stop engaging, you essentially become an accomplice in silencing us—you are enabling the abusers rather than supporting the victims.

- **Time-saving mechanisms:** Seeking support should alleviate, not add to, the workload of individuals facing harassment. Wherever possible, have support staff take action rather than the researcher themselves. Offer reassurance that supporting them is not a hindrance to staff, but part of the institution’s responsibilities.

#### RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES

“One of the hardest things about dealing with harassment was the amount of time and effort that I had to put into getting help.”

- **Adapt to the individual’s needs.** It is important to recognise that individuals will have different reactions to online harassment, and different needs. If in doubt, ask the individual whether or not they would find something helpful. Considerations include:
  - Some people who face online abuse choose to ignore it, while others decide to respond to certain people or groups. Adapt communications

and safety plans according to their wants and needs, which may change over time.

- Some people may wish to be heavily involved in the decision making process while others may prefer that support staff take action without consultation.
- Give the researcher opportunities to decide who they would like to liaise with.
- It may be helpful to suggest the individual bring a trusted support person, faculty advocate, or senior staff member with them to meetings.
- Personal support from senior leadership can be beneficial, but should ideally come from someone with whom the researcher has an existing relationship.
- Consider relevant cultural needs and other demographic factors, for example, by connecting Māori researchers with the DVC Māori.

#### RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES

“Sometimes the person who can provide the best moral support isn’t the person in the most senior position, it’s a leader or mentor who understands where you’re coming from as a Māori, LGBT+, or otherwise underrepresented academic”

- **Feedback loops and follow-ups:** Keep the researcher informed and check that their needs are being met throughout the response. Gather feedback at the conclusion of the response to refine processes.

Recognise that an individual’s circumstances or feelings towards the situation may change over time, and harassment may start to affect them more than anticipated. If they initially decline support services, it’s worth checking in and letting them know that help is still available.

#### RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVES

“Being in the media can build credibility with students and colleagues, it can influence politics, and it can lead to academic collaborations. It’s important that we are supported to continue engaging.”