

RESEARCH

# Contrapower harassment in paramedicine: Experiences of academic staff in Australian universities

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## Abstract

**Background:** Although bullying and harassment among academic staff has been well researched, research on students bullying and harassing academic teaching staff (ie, contrapower harassment) is less common. Contrapower harassment has been on the rise in academia over the last decade, partly attributable to changes in the student–faculty staff relationship. This study aimed to understand better the extent and impact of students' contrapower harassment on paramedic academic teaching staff within Australian universities, as well as actions and interventions to address it.

**Methods:** This study used a two-phase mixed methods design. In phase 1, a convenience sample of paramedic teaching academics from 12 universities in Australia participated in an online questionnaire. In phase 2, an in-depth interview was conducted with nine participants from phase 1.

**Results:** Seventy-six academic teaching staff participated in the study. Survey results showed that most academics surveyed had experienced harassment from paramedic students, with the highest incidence of harassment occurring during student assessment periods. Alarming, over 30% of the academics surveyed had been 'stalked' by a student and over 50% had felt powerless and helpless when students had attacked them on social media. Problematic students were identified as those who presented with an over-inflated sense of entitlement or with psychological states and traits that find it challenging to accept feedback and failure, and look to externalise their failures. Reasons for increases in contrapower harassment included a complex mix of consumer and demand-driven education, on-demand (and demanding) instant gratification and degree self-entitlement, and an increase in social media and online learning (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020).

**Conclusion:** Although most of the academics in this study experienced contrapower harassment by students, they also report that most students are level-headed and supportive, and do not carry out this type of harassment. Promoting student professionalism and reassessing student evaluations are starting points for addressing this type of harassment. Further research on the broader systemic issues that influence the contributors to contrapower harassment is needed.

## Keywords

contrapower harassment; paramedicine; academic bullying; self-entitlement

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## INTRODUCTION

Bullying and harassment are prevalent in academia.(1–3) A review by Prevost and Hunt (3) found that between 25% and 95% of academics experience bullying in the

workplace with the most common types being psychological and emotional attacks. Lampman (2) found that sex, race, age and degree status were all significant predictors of bullying; women, ethnic minorities, young academics and academics without

doctoral degrees were particularly vulnerable. Dentith, Wright, and Coryell (4) suggested that bullying was 'modus operandi' in their university and highlighted a range of reasons why universities are prone to bullying, including competitive tenure and promotion processes, ambiguous expectations, subjective evaluations, constant criticism, rejected requests, impossible service loads, no research or publication guidance from higher-ranked academics, and a culture of bullying from top-down through the ranks. This is even more concerning since bullying tends to be long-standing.(5) It is also important to distinguish between bullying and harassment, as the two are often used interchangeably, but there are similarities and differences. Bullying and harassment are similar in that they are both about the actions that hurt or harm someone physically or emotionally and about an imbalance of power where the person being hurt or harmed has difficulty stopping the behaviour.(6) PACER states that when the bullying behaviour is also based on a protected class, that behaviour is then defined as harassment (where protected classes include race, colour, religion, sex, age, disability and national origin).(6)

### **Contrapower harassment**

Contrapower harassment occurs when a person with less authority (ie, subordinate) harasses another person in a position of authority (ie, superior) in a particular context. Contrapower harassment occurs when the target of harassment possesses greater formal organisational power than the perpetrators.(7) In this sense, contrapower is a form of workplace violence (WV), and therefore involves the intentional use of power, including the threat of physical force, against another person or group, that can result in harm to physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. It includes verbal abuse, bullying/mobbing, harassment and threats.(8) Maran and Bergotti (9) state that one of the occupational sectors at greatest risk of WV is the education sector, and most research generally assumes that bullying is perpetrated among students, but rarely considers teachers as victims. In a study conducted by the American Psychological Association Task Force exploring classroom violence directed against teachers, 80% of teachers across 48 states reported experiencing at least one instance of at least one type of victimisation in the workplace over the most recent school year.(10)

In higher education, bullying among academic staff has also been well researched, but research on students bullying faculty staff is also less common.(11-14) In this context, Lampman et al. (15) defines contrapower harassment as 'student incivility, bullying and sexual attention aimed at faculty' and expressed in several forms such as comments in teacher evaluations, emails, and comments or actions in class.(3) In a study that included 257 professors, Desouza and Fansler (16) found that 72% had experienced at least one type of harassing behaviour in the previous two years, with 96% of these experiencing incivilities, 31% experiencing sexual harassment and 11% experiencing ethnic harassment. Six different types of bullying towards professors have also been identified: hostility, anger or

aggression; rude, disrespectful or disruptive behaviours; intimidation, threats, bullying or accusations; challenging, arguing or refusing behaviours; unwanted sexual attention; and sexual harassment.(15) In a study by Grauerholz (17), the most common forms of harassment were sexist and verbal sexual comments, undue attention, and body language, but there were also more major forms including sexual assault, and most women professors perceived that students could sexually harass professors, regardless of authority.

Although contrapower harassment was traditionally seen as most common between male students and female faculty members this has been gradually changing.(7,17) Several reasons have been suggested for this, including academic self-entitlement, transgenerational issues, demand-driven education, and the use of social media, to name a few.(18) The boundaries between, and definitions of, different types of harassment and workplace violence are also blurred, as well as different language and definitions used in different disciplines and lifespans (eg, teacher–student conflict, contrapower harassment, bullying and violence in schools, contrapower sexual harassment).

### **The rise of contrapower harassment in academia**

Contrapower harassment has been on the rise in academia over the last decade because of changes in the student–faculty staff relationship. Three main reasons identified that have changed this relationship are flexible learning, electronic forms of communication, and consumer and demand-driven education.(11,19,20) Students who need to support themselves also need to juggle their education, job/s and personal lives. This has led to a range of impacts, including reduced attendance, late assessments, and poor health, including anxiety and depression.(19) Furthermore, students are choosing flexible learning options to fit their studies around personal and work requirements, leading to an electronic-based relationship with faculty staff, and faculty staff report feeling like they are education service providers rather than knowledge experts.(1) Christensen et al. (11) also suggest that with electronic forms of communication, and in an age of social media, students are becoming more aggressive in their communication with faculty staff. They do not have to experience the consequences of face-to-face communication, with many online communication forums being anonymous. Consumer-driven education and the increased corporate structure of higher education have exacerbated these issues.(1,21)

### **Contrapower harassment and health faculties**

Several studies have explored the presence and prevalence of contrapower harassment in specific health faculties. For example, White (20) found that staff experienced frequent verbal attacks related to tasks (eg, when a piece of assessment was due) from nursing students, mainly using mobile technology; and Ibrahim and Qalawa (22) found that 60% of nursing academics experienced aggressive behaviours from nursing students. Christensen, Craft, and White,(1) who reviewed these studies and others concluded that the

competitive nature of obtaining employment after graduating has meant that nursing students' behaviours were increasingly uncivil, challenging, and unprofessional; and that contrapower harassment was commonplace in nursing education. This is not just a perception of nursing academics; another study by Ibrahim and Qalawa (22) showed that 60% of students reported that they showed irresponsible behaviours, 60% expressed that they behave inappropriately and 48% believed that they behave aggressively. Contrapower harassment has also been reported in other disciplines such as sports management classrooms and business and accountancy, but we have not found any research specifically focused on contrapower harassment in paramedicine or paramedicine clinical placement.(23)

### Contrapower harassment, coping and interventions

Studies have shown that faculty staff have difficulty coping with contrapower harassment due to physical and psychological effects. Feelings of shame and embarrassment generally cause faculty staff to respond in a range of ways from remaining silent to leaving the university.(24) Faculty staff need the training to address uncivil and bullying students and tools to help educate students on recognising uncivil behaviours.(24,25) To address this, Palumbo developed and tested an e-learning module on incivility for students.(25) Results showed increased self-efficacy regarding nursing students' ability to define, detect and overcome incivility. Future research directions as suggested in the literature include exploring the emotional impact of contrapower harassment experienced by nursing academics, their coping strategies and their professional attributes.(11,22)

This study aims to understand better the extent and impact of students' contrapower harassment on paramedic academic teaching staff within Australian universities. It also captures suggestions from these academics about potential actions and interventions to address this issue. Thirdly, this study uses the 41-item

Likert scale developed and utilised by Christensen et al. (11) to understand academics' experiences of contrapower harassment and additional in-depth interviews to explore and understand deeper insights on this phenomenon. Perspectives are gained from academic teaching staff only.

## METHOD

### Study design

This study used a variant of the two-phase mixed methods design referred to as explanatory design (or explanatory sequential design).(26–29) This design begins with quantitative data collection and analysis (phase 1) followed by qualitative data collection and analysis (phase 2), where the later phase is designed by considering the results of the first phase. Our phase 1, however, was a mixed-methods design in itself, using a validating quantitative data model,(27) where quantitative findings from a survey are validated and expanded on by including a limited number of open-ended qualitative questions. Creswell and Plano Clark (27) note that in this model, the researcher collects both types of data within one survey instrument. The additional open-ended questions are additions designed to provide validation of and provide quotes from the quantitative survey findings. The qualitative information elicited from these additional questions does not result in a rigorous qualitative dataset. The overall design can be seen in Figure 1.

Since the qualitative component in phase 1 is an add-on for validation purposes, it makes sense to embed this model in the larger explanatory design, given the depth of understanding being sought. This ensures that phase 1 results can be followed up, explored further and explained, using a subsequent in-depth qualitative study. As Creswell and Plano Clark (27) describe, this follow-up explanation-based model is used when a researcher needs qualitative data to explain or expand on the quantitative results of phase 1. In this model, the

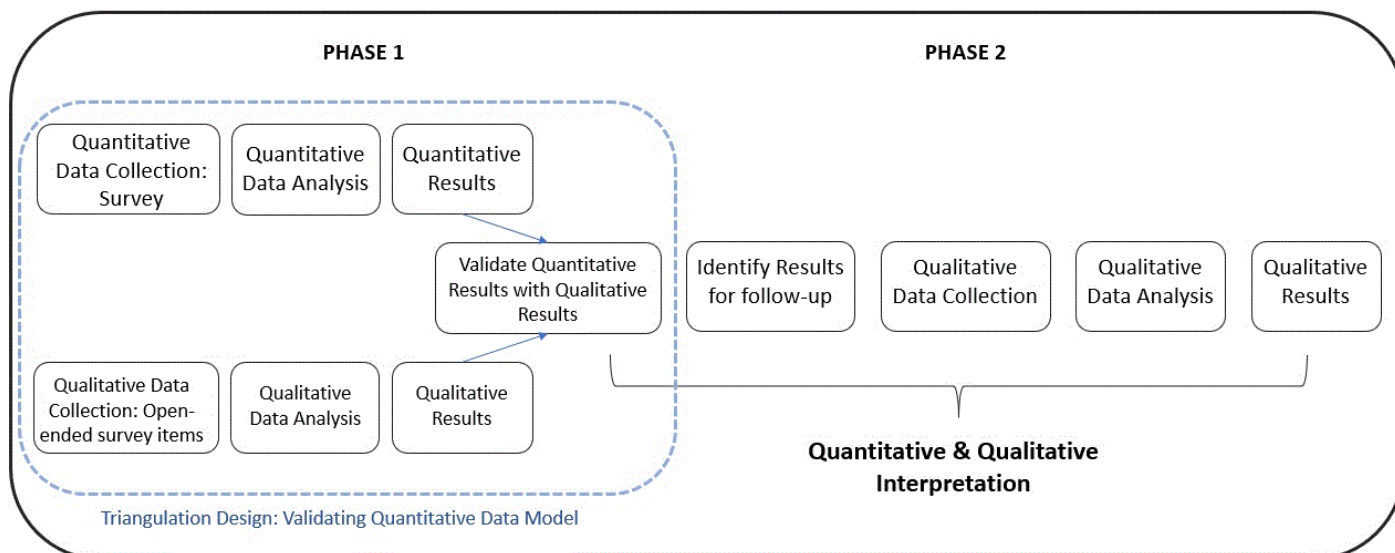


Figure 1. Follow-up explanatory design

researcher identifies specific findings from phase 1 and can explore them in more depth in phase 2.

### Population

Paramedic teaching academics from universities in Australia were invited to participate in the study, with the only inclusion criteria being that academics were currently full-time or part-time teaching paramedic classes. Sessional tutors were excluded. In phase 1, a convenience sample of paramedic teaching academics from 15 universities in Australia was contacted and asked to participate in the study by completing an online questionnaire. In phase 2, a request to participate in a more in-depth semi-structured interview was made to academics that participated in phase 1.

### Instrumentation

In phase 1, a 41-item Likert scale was used. This scale was developed by Christensen et al. (1,11) to understand the extent to which nursing academics experience contrapower harassment from undergraduate nursing students. To validate and expand on three of the items, three open-ended questions were added to the questionnaire. An additional fourth question asked participants if they had anything further to add regarding the questionnaire. The questionnaire, therefore, had four sections: (1) demographics to capture data such as age, sex, years of teaching experience; (2) experiences of contrapower harassment (five-point Likert scale, 0 being neutral); (3) contributing factors associated with contrapower harassment (five-point Likert scale, 0 being neutral); and (4) the four open-ended questions to gain additional insights into the contributing factors (from the earlier section).

In phase 2, in-depth semi-structured interviews were executed to explore deeper insights into the results from phase 1. The semi-structured interviews consisted of 15 questions. The first five questions were demographic to check that those who participated in phase 2 were representative of our demographic in phase 1. Two questions asked about the interviewee's knowledge of contrapower harassment, three questions asked interviewees about their own experiences of contrapower harassment, and five questions were deeper level questions constructed from the findings from phase 1. The interviewer was one of the authors with over 20 years of experience in qualitative research.

### Procedures

In phase 1, academics were invited to participate in the study via an email that included a link to the survey. Also included in the email were an explanatory study statement, a consent form and a statement declaring that the study was voluntary. The questionnaires were made available to participants for two weeks online using Qualtrics. A follow-up for participation in phase 2, being the in-depth semi-structured interviews, was undertaken by one of the research team. Participants interested in these interviews were contacted by email to organise an interview time and were required to

complete a consent form before the interview. Interviews took approximately one hour.

### Data analysis

Data from the 41-item Likert scale were collated and assessed for normality and skewness. Data are reported using frequency, mean (standard deviation) and medians (interquartile range) where appropriate. Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney U tests were used to test differences in the levels of contributing factors associated with contrapower harassment and age, sex, years of academic experience, academic level and current work status. Qualitative interview data from the additional four open-ended survey questions were collated and used to help understand and validate the Likert scale results. Qualitative interview data (from interview transcriptions) were analysed using content analysis as described by Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas.(30) According to Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas (30) content analysis is like thematic analysis in that it cuts across data and searches for patterns and themes. It differs, however, in that it also enables the researcher to quantify some of the data by measuring the frequency of categories and themes. This form of analysis may cautiously stand as a proxy for significance. Simple cut and paste techniques in Microsoft Word were used to collate responses and identify and group themes.

### Ethics approval

Ethics approval was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee (ID: 25672).

## RESULTS

### Participant demographics (phase 1)

The number of paramedic teaching academics that completed the online survey was 76. The mean age of these participants was 43 years ( $m = 43.39 \pm 9.55$ ), most participants worked full-time (89.3%), had between 6 and 10 years of academic experience (40.8%) and were men (55.3%). Although the survey was available to all paramedic academics, only one participant was a professor. The participants also primarily taught undergraduate students (88%) and were at the lecturer level (64%) (see Table 1). There were 37 out of 76 participants who chose to respond to two of the additional open-ended questions associated with items 2 and 8 of the contributing factors 5-point scale, and 20 participants who chose to respond to the additional open-ended questions associated with item 9 of the contributing factors 5-point scale.

### Contrapower harassment of paramedic teaching staff in Australia (phase 1)

Survey results showed that most participants experienced some form of harassment from paramedic students and the highest incidence of harassment occurred during assessment times (see Table 2). For example, over half of the academics surveyed reported sometimes experiencing students arguing with them over grades, being overly critical of grades awarded by another academic, being aggressive and disrespectful at the release of unit/course assessment grades and having

**Table 1.** Participant demographics for phase 1 (n=76)

Participant demographic	Mean (SD)
Age (years)	43.39 ± 9.55
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	42(55.3%)
Female	34(44.7%)
<b>Working status</b>	
Full-time	67(89.3%)
Part-time	8(10.7%)
<b>Academic level</b>	
Associate lecturer	4(5.3%)
Lecturer	48(64.0%)
Senior lecturer	19(25.3%)
Associate Professor	3(4.0%)
Professor	1(1.4%)
<b>Majority of teaching responsibility</b>	
Undergraduate	66(88.0%)
Postgraduate	9(12.0%)
<b>Experience (length of time as academic) (years)</b>	
2–5	25(32.9%)
6–10	31(40.8%)
11–15	10(13.2%)
16–20	6(7.9%)
21–25	4(5.2%)

SD: standard deviation

difficulty communicating with them because they overestimate their academic ability. Over 40% reported students blaming them for not teaching them effectively when they had not taken responsibility for their learning and students arguing with them about their mark because they wanted a grade change, or they compared their mark with another student. Almost 20% of the academics who took part in this survey also felt powerless to discipline students who were harassing them and/or felt they would not be believed by university management if they complained about them. Alarming, over 30% of the academics surveyed had been 'stalked' by a student and over 50% had felt powerless and helpless when students had attacked them on social media.

### Contributing factors associated with contrapower harassment (phase 1)

Quantitative results showed that most academics surveyed agreed with most of the contributing factors mentioned in the 'contributing factors' items. The commercialisation of, and consumerism in, higher education was a significant contributor to academic harassment, as was the pressure to answer emails from students quickly. Other dominant contributing factors related to students being more aggressive or showing unacceptable behaviour when assessments and assignments are due, they are unsure of what is expected of them, and when they do not have the capacity to cope with academic or personal stress. Poor language and communication skills of the students were also identified as contributing factors to the issue of contrapower harassment. A small number of participants felt a clash between academics and international students led to increases in complaints and aggressive behaviours from the students (see Table 3).

### Assignments and exams

Participants' responses to the open-ended questions from the fourth section about behaviour from students when assignments or exams are due showed many examples of negative behaviour, ranging from juvenile to disturbing and hostile. As one participant wrote, 'Mostly grumpy behaviour ... stomping about and slamming doors ... exam stress I think'; and another wrote, 'Defamatory comments on social media; swearing, shirt-fronting a male colleague'. Responses indicated an unwillingness on the part of students to take responsibility for their failure or unsatisfactory grades and blame the lecturer or the university's course material or assessment process. Many responses indicated a 'knee jerk' reaction after assessment with either blame or excuses, mitigating circumstances and requests for extension, or review of marking/assessment. There was also a lack of students' organisational skills and time management, with students emailing for 'last minute' help at unacceptable/irregular hours and demanding an instant response.

### Emails

Harassment through emails ranged from disgruntled to openly abusive. A few responses acknowledged that emails can be misconstrued, perhaps due to English being a second language, and many listed a range of common complaints which could apply to any student, such as lack of commas used, giving an impression of 'ranting'; using all capital letters; personal attacks rather than addressing an issue or concern; generally poor grammar and wording; over-familiarity and colloquial language; length of the email; 'emotionally laden and manipulative'. Some emails were unequivocally negative and even hostile, such as demanding grade changes and threatening to escalate. As one participant wrote, 'Student wrote emails that are openly abusive, there is nothing to misconstrue'.

### Widening participation

While most agreed with an increased level of harassment experienced by academics, widening participation was only seen as one of several factors contributing to this increase. Participants also referred to student demographic characteristics and 'generational' traits, such as a general sense of entitlement, and the belief that simply because they had paid for tuition, they should be given the qualification regardless of participation and effort, as well as performance or academic achievement. There were several contrary views; for example, 'I have found that most students are respectful even with widened participation'. These comments referred to emotional and mental health issues as individual traits rather than widening participation. Those who did agree with widening participation being a significant cause stated issues such as questionable motivation and reasons for enrolment, such as parental/family pressure, general lack of academic ability underpinned by students' perception that they had the ability, and 'inappropriate admissions' leading to students placing the blame on alleged inadequacies of lecturers, course content and assessment.

**Table 2.** Paramedic academics' experiences of contrapower harassment (n = 76)

Experience	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I feel that when a student complains, their word is believed, whereas I have to justify my actions.	3 (3.9%)	14 (18.4%)	27 (35.5%)	22 (28.9%)	10 (13.2%)
2. I receive criticism about my student feedback, that is not constructive.	8 (10.5%)	19 (25.0%)	30 (39.5%)	17 (22.4%)	2 (2.6%)
3. I feel my role is less about educating students, and more about me being a provider of marks and grades.	5 (6.6%)	23 (30.3%)	27 (35.5%)	19 (25.0%)	2 (2.6%)
4. I have had experiences of students being aggressive and disrespectful to me in their responses to their marks and grades.	4 (5.3%)	22 (28.9%)	39 (51.3%)	9 (11.8%)	2 (2.6%)
5. Students do not take responsibility for their learning, and then insist it's my fault for not teaching them well enough.	2 (2.6%)	10 (13.2%)	44 (57.9%)	19 (25.0%)	1 (1.3%)
6. I feel like retaliating against a student who has been unfairly critical of me, on a personal level.	41 (35.9%)	17 (22.4%)	13 (17.1%)	4 (5.3%)	1 (1.3%)
7. I find students challenge my authority, my experience and my expertise.	8 (10.5%)	31 (40.8%)	25 (32.9%)	9 (11.8%)	3 (3.9%)
8. I notice that some students' expectations of their academic ability are too high or unachievable and this affects how they communicate with me.	0	22(28.9%)	38 (50.0%)	14 (18.4%)	2 (2.6%)
9. In my experience, as student expectations of their academic ability increase, so do complaints.	1 (1.3%)	22 (28.9%)	33 (43.4%)	17 (22.4%)	3 (3.9%)
10. I feel powerless to discipline a student who is harassing me.	25 (32.9%)	17 (22.4%)	13 (17.1%)	11 (14.5%)	10 (13.2%)
11. I have been 'stalked' by students when outside of the university physically and/or electronically.	52 (68.4%)	11 (14.5%)	10 (13.2%)	2 (2.6%)	1 (1.3%)
12. I have had students repeatedly contact me outside of the normal classroom times by email or phone messages.	13 (17.1%)	17 (22.4%)	18 (23.7%)	20 (26.3%)	8 (10.5%)
13. I have had students criticise the marks and/or feedback other academics have given them.	2 (2.6%)	5 (6.6%)	42 (55.3%)	22 (28.9%)	5 (6.6%)
14. I feel that students' harassment I experience is because students behave unprofessionally with university academics.	8 (10.5%)	26 (34.2%)	27 (35.5%)	12 (15.8%)	3 (3.9%)
15. I have had students argue about their marks simply because they want a higher grade.	2 (2.6%)	9 (11.8%)	34 (44.7%)	28 (36.8%)	3 (3.9%)
16. I have had students complaining about getting a higher grade when they have compared their work with other students.	4 (5.3%)	10 (13.2%)	34 (44.7%)	26 (34.2%)	2 (2.6%)
17. I feel I am being perceived by students not as a knowledgeable expert, but as one who provides a service.	10 (13.2%)	19 (25.0%)	24 (31.6%)	16 (21.1%)	7 (9.2%)
18. I have been the centre of unfounded student accusations of impropriety of a sexual nature.	69 (90.8%)	1 (1.3%)	4 (5.3%)	1 (1.3%)	1 (1.3%)
19. I sometimes engage in displaced aggression against other individuals as a result of student harassment.	57(75.0%)	8 (10.5%)	8 (10.5%)	3 (3.9%)	0
20. I feel angry when students harass me unnecessarily.	18(23.7%)	22 (28.9%)	23 (30.3%)	12 (15.8%)	1 (1.3%)
21. I feel scared and fear for my physical safety when a student is verbally aggressive.	41(53.9%)	18(23.7%)	14(18.4%)	2(2.6%)	1(1.3%)
22. I feel helpless and powerless when students personally attack me on social media.	37 (48.7%)	14 (18.4%)	12(15.8%)	9(11.8%)	4(5.3%)
23. I am irritated when students actively engage with their electronic devices (eg, mobile phones, tablets, laptops) in the lesson I am teaching.	5 (6.6%)	17 (22.4%)	30 (39.5%)	18 (23.7%)	6 (7.9%)
24. I have been accused of being racist because students are not happy with the mark they have been awarded or don't feel supported as they would expect.	61 (80.3%)	6 (7.9%)	9 (11.8%)	0	0
25. I am concerned for my professional reputation when I respond to a student who has harassed me.	28 (36.8%)	18 (23.7%)	19 (25.0%)	6 (7.9%)	5 (6.6%)

**Table 3.** Paramedic academics' attitudes to the contributing factors associated with contrapower harassment

Attitude	Percentage
1. There is a lot of pressure on academics to answer emails from students quickly.	79%
2. Some students write emails that can be misconstrued as abusive and disrespectful because they have poor written language skills.	57.9%
3. I am distressed when student emails attack me personally and when they are demanding or confrontational.	53.9%
4. I believe that consumerism in higher education leads some students to believe that they hold a greater balance of power than the academics.	72.3%
5. Sometimes, I am not sure whether it is in my best interests to report student harassment of me to the university.	44.7%
6. I feel that students harass academics because students do not have the ability to cope with the academic and personal stressors.	59.2%
7. Sometimes I feel I have not received support from the university when I report a student's harassment.	34.2%
8. It is usually when assignments or exams are due that I get the most unacceptable behaviour from students.	64.5%
9. I believe widening participation has led to increased levels of student harassment of academics.	22.4%
10. I believe students hold the view that academics owe them something because they are paying for their degree.	77.7%
11. The commercialisation of higher education has led to some students being self-absorbed and self-centred, and as a result they are quick to blame others rather than accept responsibility.	72.4%
12. The diversity of the student cohort has led to me being harassed more frequently.	11.9%
13. When students are unclear or unsure of the programme and/or university requirements, they display more aggressive and unacceptable behaviour.	68.4%
14. Students today use aggression to exert power over academics.	47.8%
15. I believe that there is often a cultural clash when students behave aggressively or inappropriately towards me.	15.8%
16. The way some students communicate with me is belittling.	40.85%

### Additional comments

When allowed to add further comments to the survey, academics that responded focused mostly on harassment or perceived harassment. Their responses also provided more detail to the data they provided in previous sections of the survey, particularly regarding students' inappropriate comments and complaining on social media and similar forums, and students' sense of entitlement and immaturity. Some participants provided commentary regarding ideas around contributing factors for contrapower harassment and one quote was: 'Often the problem arises from students not having the ability to accept constructive feedback ... or reflect on their adverse actions.' There was a range of detailed responses addressing perceived systemic and institutional shortcomings and lack of support. In particular, the administration's focus on the 'customer (ie, student) is always right' concept.

### The relationship between demographics and contributing factors (phase 1)

The analysis of differences between participant experiences of contrapower harassment and the contributing factors associated with contrapower harassment showed no statistically significant difference (see Table 4). Internal reliability of the experience and the contributing factor scale using Cronbach's alpha coefficient reported .92 and .87, respectively, which indicates a good to excellent level of internal consistency.(27)

### Participant demographics (phase 2)

Six male and three female paramedic academic staff from five different universities in Australia (Monash University, University of Southern Queensland, University of the Sunshine Coast, Australian Catholic

University, and University of Tasmania) took part in the semi-structured in-depth interviews. Each interview took between 45 minutes and 1 hour to complete. All were lecturers or senior lecturers. Two were course coordinators, and one was a discipline team leader. At the time of the interviews, the years of working at their current university varied between 6 months and 16 years, and four had worked at multiple universities. Seven were full-time employees, and the other two were part-time. Seven taught undergraduate students, and two taught predominantly undergraduate students but also some postgraduate students. Before COVID-19, almost all taught in face-to-face mode, but now they mainly teach online during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020–2021.

### Paramedic academic perceptions of contrapower harassment (phase 2)

All interviewees reported that they had experienced episodes where they had felt harassed by students. The data revealed that how they described their experiences of harassment varied greatly, using words and phrases such as 'disparaging approaches and demeaning statements through a veil of anonymity', 'personal attacks with unsubstantiated statements through student evaluations', 'ongoing and sustained', 'personal and related to one course', 'addressed poorly in class', 'hurtful words', 'letters passed around', and 'four-year-old tantrums'. Several interviewees spoke of past students who had graduated, expressing serious concerns about their professionalism and abilities concerning patient management and safety.

All interviewees reported feeling that contrapower harassment was on the increase, and some reported it

**Table 4.** Comparison between reported experiences of participants and demographic factors associated with contrapower harassment

	Experiences of contrapower harassment	Sig	Contributing factors associated with contrapower harassment	Sig
Sex	U = 746.0, Z = -0.7	p = 0.48	U = 662.0, Z = -0.544	p = 0.58
Majority of teaching responsibility	U = 246.5, Z = -1.284	p = 0.19	U = 272.0, Z = -0.892	p = 0.37
Work status	U = 164.0, Z = -1.829	p = 0.06	U = 254.0, Z = -0.509	p = 0.76
Academic level	U = 1.256, Z = -0.672	p = 0.86	U = 0.577, Z = -0.890	p = 0.96
Years of experience	U = 4.26, Z = -1.289	p = 0.37	U = 6.59, Z = -1.712	p = 0.15

Sig: significance

was a dramatic increase. Other reasons mentioned as factors contributing to this contrapower harassment were students being more 'opinionated and commercialised', 'unsettled and frustrated', grades being a 'commodity or currency'. The COVID-19 pandemic and the changes made in higher education to manage this was also reported as contributing an additional impact to online contrapower harassment. One interviewee described the complexity of delivering education through the pandemic by saying:

It's probably a group of factors. Social media does make it easier to complain about something. It's an easy way for people to separate themselves from others – rather than address the problem face-to-face. With face-to-face, you can address it then and there – as that is what you do as an adult. Now people go straight to the manager, and that is how it is evolving. I also pick up on personality traits. There are certain personality traits – I am no expert to define those – but in general, they are the ones that don't engage in the classroom, they do eye-rolling, and think this is beneath them. I think it is slowly creeping up on us – if you weren't paying attention, you wouldn't notice it.

### Student evaluations

All participants reported having experienced what they felt were unfounded comments in student evaluations. However, what did differ was the participants' perceptions of how the university responded to those comments, reportedly on a spectrum from positively supportive to antagonistically unsupportive. The timing of student evaluations was perceived as a factor that influenced scoring as participants reported that student evaluations were usually released just after significant or final grades had been published. Furthermore, with some universities implementing continuous student feedback mechanisms throughout the semester, academics may feel pressure to make knee-jerk continuous unit changes leading to unnecessary curriculum creep. All interviewees reported experiencing positive comments from most students in evaluations and they reported this particularly aligned to when they had felt they had delivered quality teaching. That notwithstanding, participants also reported feeling disproportionately negatively affected by poor or critical student comments with one participant saying, 'It's always that one comment that isn't good that affects you the most.' One of the interviewees described in detail the sudden onset of anxiety felt when grades were released.

However, it was also acknowledged that harassment could be 'cohort' or 'group within the cohort' related to reports that cohorts find a 'new target', meaning a new staff member next year.

### Social media

Most interviewees perceived that social media was a strong cause for the increase in harassment. Interviewees reported feeling a loss of confidence, violated, and experiencing decreased job satisfaction due to harassment on social media. Two of the interviewees had been directly affected by 'cyberbullying', and the other interviewees knew of others who had experienced this in some form or another. Cyberbullying is bullying using information and communication technologies (eg, email, Facebook) to repeatedly and intentionally harm a person who cannot easily defend him or herself.<sup>(31)</sup> There were also some benefits to social media described by the interviewees. One interviewee described how students informed him about students cheating in one of his exams after seeing them gloat about it on social media. Another interviewee said students told her about other students posting derogatory comments about the interviewee on Facebook. There was general agreement among interviewees in this current study that they felt most students were respectful and supportive and did not themselves like this kind of behaviour, causing fractions among students.

### Student self-entitlement

No interviewees thought all students were self-entitled but did acknowledge an increasing number of students who were. Self-entitlement was not wholly seen as a negative trait either. Several interviewees commented that students were entitled to a good education but not a good grade, and this distinction was not made clear to students. Self-entitlement was observed mainly with undergraduate students with specific characteristics, often referred to as a 'generational thing'. These characteristics included 'high achievers', 'not the students who have struggled', 'spoon-fed students', and 'students from certain private schools'. Problematic students were seen by interviewees as those with an over-inflated sense of entitlement expecting to be given a good grade regardless of effort. There were mixed feelings by interviewees about whether self-entitlement was an issue for students in clinical placements. Clinical placements were considered as an opportunity to learn, among other things, about vulnerable people and a place that was challenging (eg, night shifts), often giving students a reality check and reducing their self-entitlement attitude. There was also an



acknowledgement by interviewees that most states only had one placement provider and they felt this might temper or quell poor behaviours by some students given the risk posed to getting a job later if they showed any poor performance or behaviour.

### **Student meeting times**

Interestingly, although students showed entitlement towards good grades, they did not establish much appetite towards dedicated student meeting times organised by teaching staff. Most interviewees reported having established regular dedicated meeting times, yet these vary in terms of structure and format. Some interviewees made themselves available through email, others through Facebook and Messenger, desk phone diverted to a mobile, open-door policy, peer support and tutorials. Some interviewees have accessible calendars, so students know when they are on campus and when they are available. Most interviewees stated that they made themselves available but that students rarely took them up on these opportunities to meet.

### **Support when contrapower harassment occurs (phase 2)**

Informal support networks (eg, fellow academic staff) were predominantly used by academic staff when they experienced contrapower harassment. In addition, interviewees felt that the amount of support they received reduced 'the further up the university hierarchy you go'. As one interviewee stated, 'the support at a local level is always really good – it disappears the further you are removed from your local group.' Another interviewee stated, 'Sitting down with staff members in the department ... we work through problems as a team and support each other there ... but then in terms of support of faculty ... faculty can turn around, or uni can turn around and say ... you have done this badly on this unit – so what are you going to do to change? ... as if we have the problem.' Some interviewees did feel comfortable using formal university networks if they needed to, but others felt this was not an option. Seven out of the nine interviewees reported feeling supported by their direct supervisors when they reported an incident. The remaining two reported that their incidences were ignored. Line managers and programme leads, and the head of learning and teaching were also seen as supportive to most interviewees. One interviewee, however, said that they did not have any support networks and stated, 'If you don't get on with other staff then you ride it out yourself ... it is a bit like mob mentality.'

In terms of university support, most interviewees felt that the university supported them to a degree but was more focused on student experience rather than staff health and well-being. All but one interviewee felt that their university could do a better job emphasising that it is inappropriate to bully staff and lecturers. Five interviewees stated that their university had good policies about behaviour and professionalism but felt like these were not always supported in practice. For example, 'I generally find the direct supervisor's support is very strong ... it falls off the further the person is

removed from the local level ... the worse it gets ... so by the time it gets to the university or faculty level they are only interested in their good name.' One interviewee stated that they would not know if the university could support them as they would not dare go above their supervisor anyway as there was a culture of fear.

### **The resilient teacher: Everyone is vulnerable at different times – although some are more vulnerable than others! (phase 2)**

Results indicated a consensus that all academics could get harassed at some stage. Although interviewees perceived that everyone is vulnerable, they also felt that certain characteristics influenced how, to what extent, and the level at which, someone is harassed. Protective characteristics identified by interviewees include the type of lingo a teacher used, relatability, teaching style, the number of years an academic had been working clinically, whether the academic still works 'on the ground' and what is going on in the life of the academic at the time. Furthermore, the content of a unit taught can attract greater criticism, especially when students cannot see the relevance to their future practice. For example, research units may have lower teaching scores and greater criticism compared to clinical units such as trauma or cardiology. Conflicts also tended to occur between a student and staff member who had a large age gap rather than a young or older person. Strong personality types of both teacher and student were referred to often, with interviewees suggesting that some personalities 'just don't get on'.

Four male interviewees said that they felt no differences in the level and frequency of harassment experienced by women and men. In contrast, two female interviewees felt that male academics were less likely to be harassed and experienced fewer levels of harassment. However, one of the female participants suggested that maybe this was her perception and perhaps men did not talk about it. The other female participant felt that there was no difference. One interviewee spoke about the influence of blurred role delineation and its impact on harassment, suggesting that this occurred through nepotistic recruitment processes and students being employed as staff members.

### **Interventions and processes for addressing contrapower harassment (phase 2)**

Interviewees were asked at the end of their interview for suggestions on how contrapower harassment could be addressed. Two main themes emerged across the nine interviews, and within these two themes were several potential avenues for change and interventions. From the interviews, it was also apparent that participants felt that addressing these themes would require a 'whole of university' approach.

### **Promoting student professionalism**

There was a need for interventions that promoted student professionalism as a university-wide approach even before a person entered the university, from the onset as a student, and throughout a student's degree. In terms of prior enrolment, it was suggested by a few of

the interviewees that students could engage in a contract process with the university, where clear expectations and behaviours of both the university and the student are set out and clarified. Then, throughout a degree programme, students needed to be reminded of their contract and be held accountable ('just as you would be in the workplace in front of a patient'). One interviewee also suggested psychometric testing regarding paramedics, as psychometric testing was often used in the profession before hiring a graduate anyway. Another interviewee suggested that at the onset of a degree, students could participate in a type of induction process, where they worked through scenarios and could discuss issues such as academic misconduct online and in meetings, behavioural expectations, setting boundaries, taking responsibility and accountability. As one interviewee stated, 'universities need to set boundaries early and often'. One interviewee mentioned that students at their university already did academic integrity units and said there was no reason that units on acceptable behaviour could not be included. Two interviewees suggested that professionalism should be incorporated as a component of a student's grades. Other suggestions included connecting experienced academics to those who are junior and ensuring academics model the behaviours they want to see in students. Peer mentoring programmes by students where older students mentor younger ones were also suggested.

### Reassessing student evaluations

There was consensus among participants that universities need to reassess the true value of student evaluations and take on a 'whole of university approach' to respond to student evaluations. Throughout the interviews, interviewees reported that some universities responded to evaluations very poorly while others did so very constructively and positively. Training was suggested for both students and staff: students being trained on what student evaluations were for and staff (at differing university levels) being trained on how to respond to evaluation results. It was suggested that this could be a simple online module. Also emphasised was that universities needed to be noticeably clear on the 'what, why and how' of student evaluations. One interviewee explained, 'the university needs to be clear on what they are doing with evaluations ... there are times when they can give too much voice to the student ... and I know historically students have been ignored which is also wrong ... so it needs to be balanced.' As with student professionalism, the establishment of mentoring relationships between junior and senior staff was also suggested as a mechanism to help teachers respond to evaluations. Senior staff could debrief staff who receive negative evaluations and/or help filter comments in terms of which are pertinent, and which are not relevant.

Reducing the power of student evaluations at the institutional level was also suggested. Most interviewees suggested one change was to consider the timing of student evaluations, administering them in the first few weeks of the next semester. Another suggestion was to examine the role anonymity plays in the impact of these

evaluations. There was, however, acknowledgement by some of the interviewees that student evaluations were potentially useful if administered well.

## DISCUSSION

Our study showed that most paramedic teaching staff have experienced some form of harassment by students, and harassment is on the increase. Interviewees also reported mild to severe impacts associated with their experiences of harassment, as well as mild to severe responses. Verbal and written abuse were the most common forms of harassment, with more severe forms of harassment (eg, stalking) having a lower prevalence rate in line with previous research.(11,19,20) Although, over 30% of interviewees had experienced stalking. Harassment was also found to be more prevalent during assessment and when grades were released. Several other studies had found that different forms of verbal aggression (online and face-to-face) were common when students wanted their grades changed.(1,16,22) The extent of increase has also been described elsewhere; for example, the article 'Is it resolved? One story of academic contrapower harassment and cyberbullying' (32) explained that security personnel at their university regularly dealt with contrapower harassment and had a set of protocols they typically offered to harassed professors.

Interestingly, the study's results differed from previous contrapower harassment studies concerning findings on sexual harassment and racism. In both phase 1 (survey) and phase 2 (interviews), sexual harassment and racism by students were not reported as significant issues. These findings contrast the work of others who reported sexual bribery, unwanted sexual attention and blatant sexism experienced by staff,(1,16,20) as well as racism.(7,33) One possible reason could be the fact that contrapower sexual harassment is often perceived as less serious than sexual harassment.(34) Alternatively, the rise in other forms of contrapower harassment (eg, cyberbullying of teachers) may out shadow sexual harassment or racism, but it does not mean it is non-existent. Although the survey results showed that there was no difference between academics based on sex, time in job and level of employment, participants in the interviews did feel there were some differences. For example, in our interviews, two of the interviewees felt that there was a clash between academics and international students, leading to increases in complaints and aggressive behaviours, and there were also differences in the way female and male interviewees perceived the extent to which they experienced contrapower harassment.

### What causes contrapower harassment? The collision of consumer-driven education and student self-entitlement

Our study found two interconnected key factors at the heart of contrapower harassment, namely consumer-driven education and student self-entitlement. This was also a significant finding with research conducted by Christensen et al. (11) on contrapower harassment in

nursing in Australia. In 2012, Australia introduced a new national policy in higher education designed to create what is being described as a demand-driven system (ie, uncapping of places) that is shaped by patterns of student demand and by the responsiveness of institutions to the demands (35). King and James (35) describe it as having far-reaching ramifications, and although it has obtained several goals (eg, expand choices, create growth, enhance equity), particular issues around academic standards need further monitoring. Stokes and Wright (36) also mention the issue of lowering standards and add to it a decline in student quality, where students do not have the academic capacity to complete their chosen degree.

Accompanying this is consumer mentality, which has been on the rise among millennial students who perceive they are customers of the university because they have paid tuition and expect a return for their dollars, where teachers are seen as customer service representatives.(37) Chowning and Campbell (38) describe academic self-entitlement as the expectation of academic success without personal responsibility for achieving that success. Hartman (39) explains that this type of self-entitlement has become increasingly evident as 'Generation Y' have entered higher education and suggests that this behaviour emphasises performance goals rather than learning goals, putting the core values of education at risk. She adds that these students experience 'strong emotions when outcomes fail to meet their expectations'. Academic self-entitlement has been associated with student incivility and ineffective learning in university settings.(38)

Four aspects have been associated with academic self-entitlement,(36,37) all of which were mentioned by interviewees in our study. These include low personal responsibility, confusing effort with accomplishment, expectations to control how knowledge is delivered and how grading is done, and expectation of return (ie, passing grade or good job) because they have 'purchased' their education. Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagenaar (40) suggest there is a need to 'place student entitlement in its social context, with specific attention to the prevalence of the consumer mentality, grade inflation, and the self-esteem of the student generation.' Paramedic academics also felt that students were not prepared for university life or the competing challenges between their personal and professional lives. Poor language skills were also seen as an issue, and this was often associated with consumer-driven education. Other contributing factors were found using the Likert-scale survey, but more insights gained from the open-ended survey questions and phase 2, have us concluding that these are better described as the mechanisms students use to harass teachers, and they are mentioned in more detail below. Through the very ease of use of these mechanisms, contrapower harassment appears to have increased, but they are not causes per se.

### **What mechanisms do students use to harass? The 'veil of anonymity'**

Traditionally, most harassment has been reported either face-to-face or in written form in student evaluations and email. Our study showed similar results to other studies that found flexible learning and electronic forms of communication contributing to contrapower harassment.(11,19,20) The pressure exerted on academics to answer student emails quickly was also seen as a significant contributing factor, a major contributor also found by Christensen et al.(11) Most interviewees perceived that social media was a strong cause for the increase in harassment. In line with previous research,(41) interviewees reported feeling a loss of confidence, feeling violated, and experiencing decreased job satisfaction due to harassment on social media. Two of the interviewees had been directly affected by 'cyberbullying', and the other interviewees knew of others who had experienced this in some form or another. Cyberbullying is considered worse than traditional forms of bullying because it has the potential to reach a larger audience, has increased potential of anonymity, lower levels of direct feedback and lower levels of supervision.(42) White (20) also reported malicious rumour-mongering by students in English universities.

In terms of anonymous student evaluations, numerous studies have reported the increased level of fear, frustration, insecurity and powerlessness when harassment is anonymous.(31,41,43) Interestingly, the impact of student evaluations on professionalism has also emerged in the literature. For example, a study by Arthur (44) showed that anonymous student evaluations did little to improve the lecturer's professionalism or practice and that lack of trust, and the policing of performance creates a culture where there is a clear division between management and staff. Interviewees in our study also questioned whether or not student evaluations had more benefits than pitfalls, the main concern being that these evaluations were anonymous. Participants expressed concern about how easy it is for students to post defamatory and potentially career-damaging comments on social media and in anonymous student evaluations, with the onus of proof being on the academics to refute them. Pearson, Andersson, and Porath (45) suggest that those with less power (eg, students) tend to retaliate in subtle ways towards superiors (eg, professors) rather than by outright confrontation, leaving mechanisms such as social media and anonymous evaluations open for abuse by students, particularly those with tendencies of academic self-entitlement.

### **What impact does contrapower harassment have on paramedic teaching academics and are some teachers more vulnerable than others?**

In our study, three out of the nine interviewees spoke of leaving previous university positions because of student harassment and not being supported by their previous university. One interviewee was considering leaving their current university. The literature highlights many impacts of contrapower harassment on academics, from

loss of motivation to more severe forms of psychological and emotional stress.(9,11,22) Conflict between a student and teacher has been cited as a major precursor for teacher burnout and teachers leaving the profession, for both new and experienced teachers.(37) Lippmann, Bulanda, and Wagenaar (40) suggest that although there may only be a few self-entitled students in a class, they demand a large amount of teacher time and energy. Another impact found in our study was the divide that contrapower harassment was causing between students themselves. Interviewees felt most students were respectful and supportive and did not like this kind of behaviour, causing factions among students. Berlanda et al. (10) explain the impact of contrapower harassment not only on the teachers that experience it but also on those who witness it. Impacts include a poorer learning environment, lost instructional time and severe negative consequences for the well-being and performance of students. Other costs mentioned are medical and psychological care costs, reduced motivation and commitment, and costs associated with teacher replacement and training.(10) Several interviewees spoke of past students who had graduated, expressing serious concerns about their professionalism and abilities in patient management and safety.

There was consensus that all academic teaching staff were potentially vulnerable to harassment. This finding was similar to Tin (46) who, when asked if teachers thought any specific category of teachers were targeted more often than others, found that the majority of teachers agreed that most, if not all teachers, experienced bullying by students. This finding was also reported in other studies.(14) Although interviewees perceived that everyone is vulnerable, they also felt that certain characteristics influenced how, to what extent, and the level at which, someone is harassed. Protective characteristics identified by interviewees include the type of lingo a teacher used, relatability, teaching style, the number of years an academic had been working clinically, whether the academic still works 'on the ground' and what is going on in the life of the academic at the time. Pervin and Turner (47) reported that new teachers and inexperienced teachers were more likely to be targeted and Chowning and Campbell (38) showed that individual differences such as attitudes, sex and personality also predict student incivility. Some students were observed harassing teachers with specific demographics. One interviewee stated that students pick up on less resilient teachers and target those teachers, thinking they will have a better chance of getting what they want (eg, increase in grade). Two interviewees that had been teaching for many years stated that the older they became, the less likely they were to be negatively impacted by harassment. One said, 'The older I get, the more capacity I have to bounce back'. Resilience has been an essential characteristic of teacher effectiveness in other studies, and lack of resilience has been related to work-related psychological ill-health, including anxiety and depression.(43)

Teachers were also more vulnerable if they had few support networks. Most interviewees felt supported by

their direct supervisors when they reported an incident but also felt that support decreased 'up the university hierarchy'. Senior leadership in academic environments tends to protect the bully, often using indirect and covert forms of retaliation against 'complaining' faculty members.(21) In terms of overall university support, most participants felt that the university supported them to some degree but was more focused on student experience than staff health and well-being. One participant, however, felt like they had no informal or formal support networks, and were not able to report incidences despite mechanisms existing. These findings corroborate earlier research which has shown that students' bullying goes unreported because of no mechanisms to report or lack of confidence in the mechanisms to report.(46)

### **What can we do about contrapower harassment?**

Suggestions made by interviewees about how contrapower harassment can be addressed fell under three main categories: promoting student professionalism, building teaching staff resilience through mentoring and reassessing student evaluations. In terms of student professionalism, interviewees suggested promoting student professionalism as a university-wide approach from before students begin their degree to the end of their degree, with intermittent reminders throughout. The idea of contracts for students up front was a popular suggestion and worth following up in terms of the contracts now used in some Australian high schools. One interviewee mentioned that students at their university already did academic integrity units and said there was no reason that units on acceptable behaviour could not be included. In a study by Al-Abdulrazzaq, Al-Fadhli, and Arshad (48), it was found that most students thought that their academic assessments should include an assessment of professionalism and should be used as a selection criterion in their future. Two interviewees suggested that professionalism should be incorporated as a component of a student's grades. In a study by Byszewski et al. (49) on students' perceptions of enhancing professionalism, students suggested role modelling, faculty-led case scenario sessions, enhancing interprofessional interactions and the creation of special awards to staff and students to 'celebrate' professionalism. Interestingly, current evaluation systems were considered the least effective. Role modelling was also suggested by Hendelman and Byszewski.(50)

The establishment of mentoring relationships between junior and senior staff was also suggested as a mechanism to help teachers respond to evaluations. Interviewees believed that senior staff could debrief younger staff who have received negative evaluations and/or help filter comments that are pertinent and which are not relevant. Of particular relevance here is research by Anibas, Brenner, and Zorn (51) who explains that newly hired academic teaching staff are often enticed at the last minute from the practice setting, often have no previous educator experience and are often unprepared and left overwhelmed. They proposed and tested several mentoring programmes and showed that

after these programmes, new teaching staff felt more self-assured, prepared, encouraged and supported. There is also a range of other different types of mentoring approaches where more experienced teachers mentor new teachers.(52) In terms of reassessing student evaluations, the main suggestions ranged from considering carefully the timing of evaluations to eliminating student evaluations together. A 'whole of university approach' is required to ensure everyone at every level, both staff and students, understands the purpose of evaluations and how they should be administered.

### Limitations

In terms of study limitations, this was only a small study of 76 paramedic teaching academics across Australia, with only nine academics taking part in the follow-up in-depth interviews. However, the results give some ideas of the current state of play of contrapower harassment in the paramedic discipline at Australian universities. As such, the results are most useful to Australian universities, particularly for awareness-raising about contrapower harassment and developing strategies for addressing contrapower harassment. Caution is needed when interpreting the results, given the lack of external validity. Another limitation is that it is also difficult to compare our results with other studies as the scale developed by Christensen, Craft, and White (1) is new. Although the survey was available to all paramedic academics, only one participant was a professor. As with the study by Christensen and other researchers, one explanation may be that professors generally have a higher focus on research and management activities and higher degree supervision.(11,53,54)

Conducting interviews with students about contrapower harassment could have also given a more comprehensive understanding. We have only tried to understand the perspectives of teaching academics in our study. This is of course another limitation. Again, we would like to make the point that interviewees, although all had experienced some form of harassment, did not see most students showing these types of behaviours. Many spoke of situations where they had been backed or supported by other students. Even so, gaining perspectives from students would have given a 'student voice' to the study. There has been much research on oppressive pedagogies and methodologies within the university system, and several academics have called for anti-oppressive pedagogies, the decolonisation of research methodologies, an end to oppressive campus environments, and the decolonisation of universities in general.(55-61) It is important to mention this perspective, as a possible plausible explanation of some student conduct. Several of our interviewees raised the importance of a more balanced power dynamic between student and academic staff in general, and the power issues inherent in traditional academia; however, these seemed to be spoken about separately to the behaviours and issues they raised about contrapower harassment. Finally, there are limited recent studies on contrapower harassment in the context of social media and the

COVID-19 pandemic, both of which have presented unique challenges.

## CONCLUSIONS

Contrapower harassment is on the rise in academia and is experienced as a minimum in minor forms by most academics in this study. The reasons for increases are complex and may be attributable, in part, to the mix of consumer and demand-driven education, on-demand (and demanding) instant gratification and degree self-entitlement (as opposed to education self-entitlement) of current students. An increase in social media influence and use, coupled with online learning (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic) may be part of the milieu. Further, students who possess psychological traits and/or aspects of personality that struggle to acknowledge feedback preferring to externalise failure and to blame others may also play a role. Results also showed that although most of the academics in this study experienced contrapower harassment by students, they also felt that most students are supportive and do not carry out this type of harassment. The findings provide a baseline for further research and the implementation of a practical process for addressing this type of harassment. Promoting student professionalism and reassessing student evaluations are starting points. Further research on the broader systemic issues that influence the contributing factors to contrapower harassment is needed.

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## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare no competing interests. Each author of this paper has completed the ICMJE conflict of interest statement.

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