## PREPARING GRADUATES FOR SUSTAINABLE CAREERS: RAISING AWARENESS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ABUSE IN ORGANISATIONS

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The neoliberalisation of higher education tasks UK universities with producing employable graduates capable of meeting the demands of a complex, volatile, and global labour market. One area of interest is developing psychological capital as a personal resource, drawing on HERO aspects of Hope, Self-Efficacy, Resilience, and Optimism. The value of this approach comes from helping students take ownership of their careers, prepare for unforeseen circumstances, and increase the likelihood of career sustainability.

Unfortunately, such career guidance often neglects to address some of the more sinister aspects at play within organisations. Due to power dynamics, graduates, particularly those from diverse backgrounds, face the most significant risk of experiencing psychological abuse in the workplace. We believe that graduates need to be aware of these challenges, and universities should help their students identify and manage such situations when they inevitably occur. Specifically, calling out toxic work cultures can create more diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace environments.
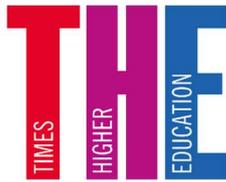
Consequently, we present twenty examples of psychological abuse in organisations before offering practical steps universities can take to enable graduates to identify and manage these occurrences. Examples of psychological abuse include:

1. Lovebombing: Showering you with praise, affection, and positivity in general at the early stages of recruitment and training.

2. Emotional Appeals: Attempting to play on emotions such as fear or loyalty by questioning your commitment to the organisation or your job.

3. False Flattery: Pseudo-compliments or 'buttering up someone' to make them more compliant or receptive to their demands.

4. Guilt Tripping: Inducing guilt to influence or alter your choices and decisions, particularly when your action does not benefit the other party.

5. Incredulity: Acting as though something stated by you is unbelievable as a way to dismiss valid concerns.

6. False Compromise: Suggesting a compromise, claiming to meet halfway, but suggesting a 'viable option' that is unfair and not an equal compromise.

7. Conforming: Pressure to engage in a way you do not wish to do because "no one else has a problem with it" or "this is just how things work here".

8. Verbal Abuse: Any form of insults, jokes or harsh criticism which includes name-calling and labelling (e.g., careless, absentminded, underconfident, rebel, high-maintenance or incompetent).

9. Malicious Gossip: Any spread of rumours, slander, lies or speculation about your personal life.

10. Setting Up for Failure: You are set impossible tasks or not given the resources to complete tasks that would otherwise be achievable.
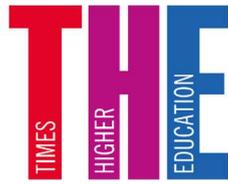
11. Nit-picking: Criticising seemingly insignificant attributes or details about your work, behaviour or appearance, leaving you questioning whether you can do anything right.

12. Humiliation: You make a genuine mistake and apologise, but another individual then seeks to embarrass you publicly for the mistake to undermine your confidence.

13. Shifting the goalposts: Telling you to do something but expecting something else, then reprimanding you for not producing what they required.

14. Deflection, Diversion, and Evasion: A manager commits an error but attempts to shift the blame to other team members rather than take accountability themselves.

15. Burden of Proof: Making a negative statement about your performance or behaviour without providing adequate reasons, with the expectation that you must disprove the claim by providing evidence.

16. Slogans: A simplistic phrase often used to shut down expressions of opinions that differ from those commonly held (e.g., "We hustle first, rest later").

17. Ghosting: Whenever you need something, even if it is important, there is no reply to your messages or requests for support. However, as soon as there is a need for you to support the other party, there is an expectation that you will assist immediately.

18. Empty Promises: You are encouraged to take on additional work with the understanding that your efforts will be rewarded via pay increases or promotions. You complete the work, but the rewards never come.

19. Sabotage: Deliberate actions taken or encouraged by co-workers in a strategic approach to destroy your career or opportunities for growth and advancement.

20. Withholding: Not providing timely and deserved promotions, raises or promised advancements.

Now that we know how psychological abuse in organisations might play out, what approaches can university career services take to help their students identify and manage such occurrences following entry into the labour market after graduation?

First, use this list of twenty examples to raise student awareness. The list is not meant to be exhaustive, so encourage students to think of other scenarios too.

Second, make it clear that experiencing psychological abuse is unfortunately commonplace in some organisations, but the fact that it is commonplace does not make it acceptable behaviour.

Third, look for clues during the assessment phase that a culture of psychological abuse may be prevalent in the organisation. Is the interviewer rude or asking inappropriate questions? Are there high levels of staff turnover? Are there a large number of current vacancies? Does the organisation perform poorly in diversity, equity, and inclusion metrics? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then perhaps reconsider your desire to work for that employer.

Fourth, look on websites where current and past employees can provide reviews of organisations. Any individual can experience a bad situation in isolation. However, if you see common themes of psychological abuse across multiple posts for the same organisation, then it likely reflects their culture.

Fifth, if these circumstances occur in the workplace, be bold and call them out at the earliest opportunity. The longer you wait, the harder it becomes, and the more the

other party feels they can get away with it. Equally, if you are not comfortable calling it out yourself, find someone in a position of power to advocate on your behalf.

Sixth, you are more than just your job. Do not be afraid to walk away from an organisation that engages in these behaviours. You may wish to flag grievances with human resources or seek legal counsel in certain circumstances.

To conclude, helping university students and graduates to develop psychological capital as a personal resource can enhance their chances of a sustainable career. However, possession of psychological capital should not mean tolerating psychological abuse. Sometimes the person does not realise their actions are malicious, so have discussions early to challenge inappropriate behaviours. If such discussions prove futile, do not be afraid to move employers if you can. Life, quite simply, is too short.

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