

Acoso Académico y Abuso de Poder en Estudiantes Universitarios: Barreras para Denunciar y Apoyo Institucional

Academic Harassment and Abuse of Power in University Students: Barriers to Reporting and Institutional Support

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Abstract

This study analyzes the phenomenon of academic harassment and abuse of power within the university environment, with particular attention to the barriers students face when reporting such situations and the role played by higher education institutions in the prevention and management of these cases. The research adopts a qualitative approach and a documentary research design based on the review of recent scientific literature published between 2018 and 2025, including approximately thirty academic articles mainly from journals indexed in international databases. Through content analysis, key categories were identified related to manifestations of academic harassment, power dynamics present in relationships between faculty members and students, as well as institutional and cultural factors influencing students' decisions to report such situations. The findings indicate that academic harassment may manifest through public humiliation, undue pressure, or the inappropriate use of academic authority, situations that negatively affect students' well-being and their trust in university institutions. However, the study also highlights the importance of distinguishing these practices from legitimate academic rigor, which is an essential characteristic of higher education and contributes to the development of critical thinking and the training of highly qualified professionals. Furthermore, research conducted in Latin America has identified the persistence of discriminatory practices related to racial or cultural factors affecting Afro-descendant and Indigenous students, which has encouraged the implementation of inclusion policies and academic support programs across several university systems in the region. In this context, the study emphasizes the need to strengthen institutional policies aimed at preventing abuse of power, promoting academic ethics, and implementing transparency and accountability mechanisms that contribute to the development of university environments based on respect, integrity, and academic excellence.

Keywords: academic harassment; abuse of power; higher education; institutional culture; academic integrity

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Introduction

The university has historically been conceived as a space for critical training, knowledge production and professional development. In this context, academic demand and intellectual discipline they are essential elements to guarantee rigorous educational processes and the training of highly trained professionals. Miscellaneous research in higher education indicates that academic environments that maintain high standards of performance, research, and critical thinking contribute to the development of students with greater analytical capacity, leadership, and social commitment (Marginson, 2019; Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

From this perspective, it is important to recognize that academic pressure or demand should not necessarily be interpreted as a negative practice. Higher education involves constant processes of evaluation, correction and learning that demand effort and responsibility from students. Recent research has indicated that demanding

academic contexts, when oriented towards the development of knowledge and intellectual autonomy, can contribute to the training of highly competent professionals and leaders who subsequently occupy relevant positions within society, including in political, scientific, or institutional spheres (Arum & Roksa, 2020; Tight, 2022).

Likewise, the fact that a teacher maintains a strict position or that he or she does not always manage to establish a completely empathetic relationship with all students does not necessarily imply a failure in his or her pedagogical work. The diversity of teaching styles and the dynamics of the university environment generate different forms of academic interaction that, in many cases, seek to strengthen the autonomy, discipline and intellectual responsibility of students.

It is also relevant to consider that there are educational institutions whose educational identity is based on models of high discipline and rigor. In several Latin American countries, some universities and educational

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centers maintain traditions linked to civic-military or pre-military training, where discipline, hierarchy and compliance with rules are central elements of the training process. In these contexts, academic demand is part of the institutional essence and the pedagogical model oriented towards leadership and responsibility.

However, even within rigorous academic environments, it is necessary to differentiate between legitimate educational demands and those practices that can be transformed into situations of harassment or abuse of power. When academic authority is used to intimidate, humiliate, or exert undue pressure on students, the boundaries of educational training are crossed and negative effects can be generated on emotional well-being and institutional trust (Karami et al., 2019; Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

In this framework, this article analyzes the phenomenon of academic harassment and abuse of power in university students, focusing on the barriers faced by students to report these situations and on the role of institutional support to prevent and address these cases within higher education.

Justification

The study of academic harassment and abuse of power in higher education is relevant for its direct impact on the quality of the training process, student well-being, and trust in university institutions. Although in recent years these problems have acquired greater visibility in public and academic debate, there is still a significant distance between the recognition of the phenomenon and the implementation of effective mechanisms to prevent and address it within universities. Various studies have indicated that many episodes of academic bullying remain unreported due to students' fear of possible retaliation, the impact on their evaluations, or negative consequences on their academic career (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Karami et al., 2019).

However, the analysis of this phenomenon requires maintaining a balanced perspective regarding the nature of university education. Academic demand, rigorous evaluation and intellectual discipline are central elements of learning in higher education and should not be automatically confused with harassment practices. Recent studies have shown that academic environments with high performance standards contribute to the development of professionals with greater critical capacity, intellectual autonomy, and leadership, fundamental aspects for scientific and social advancement (Marginson, 2019; Tight, 2022). In this sense, distinguishing between legitimate academic demand and abuse of power becomes essential to properly understand the problem.

Likewise, this reflection becomes more relevant when considering institutions whose educational identity is based on models of structured discipline, such as academies with a civic-military orientation or educational centers where hierarchy and compliance with rules are part of their institutional culture. In these contexts, academic demand constitutes an essential training component; however, this does not exclude the

need to guarantee pedagogical relations based on respect and principles of institutional integrity.

An additional aspect that deserves attention is the presence of informal dynamics known as "esprit de corps", through which some authorities or members of the academic community avoid denouncing or sanctioning inappropriate conduct by colleagues with the argument of protecting the institutional image. This practice can generate institutional silences that hinder transparency and limit students' trust in complaint mechanisms.

In this framework, the present research is justified by the need to understand the barriers faced by university students to report situations of academic harassment, as well as the role played by institutions in the construction of safe, transparent and respectful educational environments within higher education.

General objective and specific objectives

General objective

To analyze the phenomenon of academic harassment and abuse of power in university students, identifying the barriers that make it difficult to report these situations and evaluating the role of institutional support in the prevention, attention, and strengthening of educational environments based on respect, academic integrity, and the protection of student rights.

Specific objectives

1. To examine the manifestations of academic harassment and abuse of power in the university environment, differentiating them from the academic demands and discipline of the educational process.
2. Identify personal, cultural, and institutional factors that influence students' decision to report or not situations of academic bullying.
3. To analyze the role of higher education institutions in the implementation of prevention mechanisms, reporting protocols, and support systems in cases of academic bullying.
4. Reflect on the influence of informal institutional dynamics, such as the so-called "esprit de corps", in the management and treatment of complaints related to abuse of power in the university environment.

Methodology

The methodological design corresponds to a documentary and descriptive research, based on the review of recent scientific literature on academic harassment, power relations in the university environment and institutional mechanisms of prevention and complaint. To ensure the timeliness of the analysis, studies, academic articles and institutional reports published in the last eight years were considered.

The research adopts a qualitative approach of an analytical-interpretative nature, aimed at understanding the dynamics related to academic harassment and abuse of power within the university environment. It allows the phenomenon to be analyzed from a reflective perspective, considering both the manifestations of the problem and the institutional and cultural factors that

influence the way in which students perceive and face these situations in higher education.

The collection of information was carried out through the search and selection of academic sources indexed in recognized scientific databases, prioritizing research that addresses academic harassment in university contexts and the role of institutions in the face of these problems. Likewise, studies that analyze the influence of hierarchical relationships and organizational culture on conflict management within universities were included. Subsequently, the selected information was analyzed using the content technique, where approximately 30 scientific articles from indexed academic journals were considered, mainly in databases such as Scopus, as well as from other representative journals in the field of higher education and social sciences published between 2018 and 2025. This allowed for the development of a critical interpretation of the phenomenon, differentiating between the legitimate academic demand of university education and those practices that may constitute forms of abuse of power within the educational environment.

Theoretical Framework

Academic Bullying and Power Relations in Higher Education

Academic bullying has been analyzed in recent years as a problem linked to the power dynamics present within higher education institutions. In the university environment, hierarchical relationships between teachers and students generate scenarios where the academic authority can directly influence evaluations, tutorials, recommendations, and professional opportunities. When this relationship is used inappropriately, practices that affect the dignity and well-being of students can emerge (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Recent research highlights that academic bullying can manifest itself through behaviors such as public humiliation, constant disqualifications, undue pressure, or discriminatory treatment, situations that generate negative effects on the academic and emotional development of students (Karami et al., 2019). From the perspective of university governance, these dynamics can also be interpreted as an expression of structural inequality within educational organizations, where authority relations influence the distribution of power and institutional decision-making (Marginson, 2019).

Academic demand and training in higher education It is necessary to distinguish between academic bullying and legitimate educational demand. Higher education is characterized by rigorous training processes that seek to develop critical thinking, intellectual autonomy, and advanced professional skills. In this sense, strict evaluation, academic feedback, and high performance standards are fundamental elements to guarantee educational quality (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

Various studies have indicated that academic environments with high levels of demand can contribute significantly to the development of students with greater analytical skills, leadership and social commitment. Academic rigor, when it is oriented towards learning and

the development of knowledge, is an essential part of university education and should not be confused with harassment practices (Tight, 2022).

Likewise, in some educational contexts there are institutions whose formative identity incorporates models of structured discipline, such as academies with a civic-military orientation or educational centers with training traditions based on hierarchy, responsibility and leadership. In these cases, academic demand constitutes a central component of the educational process and responds to a pedagogical model that seeks to strengthen institutional responsibility and the professional commitment of students.

Barriers to reporting and institutional culture

Despite the growing attention that academic harassment receives in contemporary research, various studies indicate that many situations are not formalized through institutional complaints. Among the main reasons are fear of academic reprisals, students' dependence on teachers or authorities, and the perception that institutional processes may lack transparency or effectiveness (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020).

Likewise, some analyses of organizational culture in universities have identified informal dynamics that influence conflict management. Among them, the so-called "esprit de corps" is mentioned, understood as the tendency to protect the institutional reputation or the image of colleagues within the organization. This practice can generate institutional silences in the face of complaints of abuse of power and limit students' trust in the available complaint mechanisms (Karami et al., 2019).

In this context, understanding the institutional and cultural barriers that make it difficult to report academic harassment is essential to strengthen university policies aimed at transparency, accountability and the protection of student rights within higher education.

Discussion

The analysis of the recent literature allows us to identify that academic bullying is a problem present in different higher education systems, although its institutional recognition and the responses implemented vary considerably between countries and universities. Comparative studies carried out in European and North American universities have shown that a significant part of students have experienced situations of degrading treatment, undue pressure or abuse of authority by academic figures, particularly in contexts where hierarchical relationships influence evaluations and professional opportunities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Research carried out at universities in the United States and Canada has also indicated that the existence of non-transparent institutional structures can make it difficult to report these situations, generating perceptions of vulnerability among students (Karami et al., 2019).

However, international evidence also shows institutional experiences that have made significant progress in the prevention and management of academic bullying.

Universities in countries such as Sweden, the United Kingdom, and Australia have implemented independent reporting protocols, student accompaniment systems, and academic oversight mechanisms that have strengthened institutional trust and reduced unreported cases. These models have shown that the combination of clear policies, accessible reporting channels, and transparent research processes can contribute to improving academic coexistence and promoting safer educational environments (Tight, 2022).

At the same time, it is essential to avoid interpretations that confuse academic bullying with the educational requirements of university education. Various studies on educational quality agree that academic environments that maintain high standards of performance, intellectual discipline, and rigorous evaluation tend to generate better results in terms of scientific production, innovation, and training of highly trained professionals (Marginson, 2019). In this sense, academic demand is not only a legitimate component of the training process, but also a necessary element to strengthen the intellectual autonomy and professional responsibility of students.

In many high-performance education systems, such as those observed in leading institutions in Europe and Asia, the academic culture combines high levels of demand with solid mechanisms of pedagogical support and institutional evaluation. This combination allows academic discipline and scientific rigor to remain as pillars of university education without this implying tolerating practices that violate the dignity of students. In fact, evidence shows that academic environments that simultaneously promote academic excellence and institutional accountability tend to generate stronger and more trustworthy university communities.

From this perspective, the strengthening of transparency, supervision and accountability mechanisms is presented as a key element to prevent the abuse of power in the university environment. The implementation of clear reporting protocols, the ethical training of teachers and authorities, as well as the promotion of an institutional culture based on responsibility and mutual respect can contribute significantly to reducing the barriers that students face when reporting situations of academic harassment.

Finally, the discussion suggests that the construction of healthy university environments does not imply lowering the standards of academic demand, but rather complementing them with institutional practices aimed at integrity, transparency, and continuous improvement. In this framework, the challenge for contemporary universities is to balance the academic rigor necessary to train professionals of excellence with effective mechanisms of protection and accompaniment that guarantee pedagogical relationships based on respect and shared responsibility within the educational community.

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between countries and universities. Comparative studies in European and North American institutions have shown that a significant part of students have experienced situations of degrading treatment, undue pressure, or abuse of authority by academic figures, especially in contexts where hierarchical relationships influence evaluations and professional opportunities (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020). Research carried out at universities in the United States and Canada has also indicated that the absence of clear protocols or reliable reporting channels can generate perceptions of vulnerability among students and limit the visibility of these cases (Karami et al., 2019).

However, international evidence also shows institutional experiences that have made significant progress in the prevention and management of these problems. Universities in countries such as Sweden, the United Kingdom and Australia have implemented independent reporting protocols, student support programs and academic supervision systems that have contributed to strengthening institutional trust and reducing the underreporting of complaints. These initiatives show that the combination of clear policies, transparent processes, and accountability mechanisms can significantly improve the university climate and promote safer educational environments (Tight, 2022).

An additional aspect that has been widely analyzed in recent research is the presence of discriminatory practices related to racial or ethnic factors within the university environment. Various studies in Latin America have documented that students of African descent, indigenous people, and students belonging to historically marginalized groups may face forms of academic exclusion, derogatory comments, or stereotypes that affect their integration into university life. These situations can not only manifest themselves among students, but in some cases also involve discriminatory attitudes on the part of teachers or authorities, which generates less inclusive learning environments (Altbach & de Wit, 2020).

Research carried out in countries such as Brazil, Colombia and Mexico has indicated that experiences of racial discrimination in Latin American universities are frequently related to cultural prejudices, historical inequalities and lack of solid institutional policies aimed at inclusion. However, in recent decades, several university systems in the region have implemented affirmative action programs, inclusive access policies, and academic support mechanisms aimed at Afro-descendant and indigenous students, with positive results in terms of access, permanence, and academic performance (Marginson, 2019). These initiatives have contributed to making the problem visible and promoting greater institutional sensitivity to the dynamics of discrimination within the educational field.

In this context, the role of teachers and university authorities acquires a central importance. The active supervision of the dynamics of coexistence within the classroom, the promotion of a culture of intercultural respect and the implementation of clear protocols

against discriminatory behaviors are key elements to guarantee inclusive and equitable academic environments. Universities must not only avoid reproducing exclusionary practices, but also promote spaces where cultural and social diversity is recognized as a value within the training process.

At the same time, it is necessary to differentiate these situations of discrimination or harassment from the legitimate academic demand that characterizes higher education. Various studies on educational quality agree that academic environments that maintain high standards of performance, intellectual discipline, and rigorous evaluation tend to generate better results in terms of scientific production, innovation, and training of highly trained professionals (Marginson, 2019). Academic demand, when applied fairly and transparently, is an essential component for the development of critical thinking and the training of professionals with high levels of competence.

In this way, the discussion suggests that the strengthening of the university institutional culture does not imply reducing the levels of academic demand, but complementing them with policies of integrity, inclusion, transparency and accountability that prevent the abuse of power and discriminatory practices, guaranteeing respectful educational environments oriented to the training of professionals of excellence.

In this framework, it is also necessary to assume an explicit institutional commitment to avoid informal practices such as the so-called "esprit de corps", through which the protection of colleagues or the institutional image is prioritized over the objective investigation of possible irregularities. On the contrary, universities must promote an organizational culture based on professional ethics, respect for academic values and institutional responsibility, where teachers, authorities and students actively participate in the construction of training spaces guided by transparency, integrity and commitment to the fundamental principles of academia.

Conclusions

The analysis developed throughout the research allows us to understand that academic harassment and abuse of power represent relevant challenges within higher education systems, especially in contexts where hierarchical relationships influence processes of evaluation, tutoring and professional development of students. The literature reviewed shows that these dynamics can affect not only the individual well-being of students, but also trust in university institutions when there are no clear mechanisms for supervision, reporting and conflict resolution. The experiences documented in different university systems around the world show that the implementation of transparent institutional protocols, independent complaint mechanisms and academic support programs has contributed to improving the management of these problems and strengthening the confidence of the university community. Countries that have incorporated clear policies of academic integrity and accountability have managed to reduce the underreporting of cases and

promote safer educational environments, demonstrating that the institutionalization of good practices can generate positive results in university governance.

At the same time, the evidence reaffirms the need to differentiate between academic bullying and legitimate educational demand. University education is characterized by high levels of intellectual responsibility, academic discipline and rigorous evaluation, elements that are fundamental for the training of competent professionals and for the development of scientific knowledge. In this sense, academic demand should not be interpreted as an obstacle to student well-being, but as an essential component of the training process when it is applied under principles of equity, respect and transparency. An additional aspect identified in the analysis is the persistence of discriminatory practices or exclusions linked to racial, cultural, or social factors in some university environments. Research reviewed in Latin America shows that students of African descent, indigenous or other historically marginalized groups may face additional barriers within university life. However, inclusion policies, affirmative action programs, and institutional strategies of academic accompaniment have proven to be effective tools to improve the conditions of access, permanence, and participation of these groups within higher education.

As an added value of this research, it is proposed that university institutions consider the strengthening of academic supervision mechanisms, teacher training in professional ethics, clear reporting protocols and university coexistence programs aimed at preventing abuse of power and discriminatory practices. It is also essential to promote an institutional culture based on transparency, accountability and commitment to academic values, avoiding informal dynamics such as the so-called "esprit de corps", which can hinder the objective investigation of possible irregularities. In this sense, contemporary universities face the challenge of balancing the academic rigor necessary to train professionals of excellence with the construction of inclusive, respectful, and ethically responsible educational environments. The consolidation of these principles not only contributes to strengthening the quality of the training process, but also to consolidating university institutions that are more transparent, reliable and committed to social development.

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