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Article

Institutional Protection in Academia: Documented Misconduct and Systemic Failures (2015–2025)

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Abstract: Over the past decade, numerous cases have emerged in which academic institutions failed to remove faculty members found to have engaged in serious misconduct. This paper investigates documented instances from 2015–2025 in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France (and other countries as relevant), where credible allegations of sexual harassment, research fraud, or other academic misconduct were upheld yet the accused academics were retained by their universities. Through analysis of case studies drawn from investigative journalism, court records, and official reports, we identify patterns of institutional protection, ranging from minimal sanctions (such as short-term suspensions or formal warnings) to active concealment of findings. The case studies – grouped by type of misconduct (sexual harassment/abuse versus research misconduct) – illustrate common themes: reputational management outweighing accountability, financial and power incentives to retain star faculty, opaque disciplinary processes, and pressure on victims or whistleblowers. We discuss how these systemic failures undermine trust in academia and examine recent pressures for reform.

Keywords: academic misconduct; sexual harassment in higher education; research ethics; institutional accountability; whistleblower retaliation

1. Introduction

Academic institutions are entrusted with upholding ethical standards, protecting students and research integrity, and enforcing accountability when misconduct occurs. Yet a growing body of evidence from 2015 to 2025 suggests that universities often protect influential faculty members accused of egregious misconduct, rather than decisively sanctioning them. In numerous high-profile cases across the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, France and beyond, professors who were credibly found to have violated sexual harassment policies or committed research misconduct were not terminated; instead, they frequently received light penalties or were quietly retained by their institutions.

This pattern of “institutional protection” raises urgent questions about academic governance and priorities. While each case is unique, collectively they point to systemic failures: slow or inadequate investigations, punishments that do not fit the severity of offenses, and an apparent reluctance to remove renowned or well-funded academics. Universities often face conflicts of interest when handling misconduct by star researchers or prominent professors, given concerns over reputation, donor relations, grant revenue, and potential legal liability. Critics argue that these factors can lead to minimal accountability for wrongdoers and a culture of impunity in academia[1][2].

This paper undertakes a formal investigation of documented cases in which academic staff were found (by internal investigations or external inquiries) to have engaged in serious misconduct yet remained employed by their academic institution. We draw on verified reports from journalism, legal filings, and university records. By comparing case studies of (a) sexual harassment and abuse and (b) research misconduct across several countries, we seek to identify common patterns of institutional response. We also examine the consequences of these responses for victims, campus communities, and the integrity of scholarship. The goal is to rigorously document these cases and analyze how and why systemic failures occurred, providing a knowledge base to inform policy reforms.

2. Methodology

Our research methodology involved gathering and reviewing cases from 2015 to 2025 in which faculty or senior researchers were formally accused of misconduct, an allegation was substantiated by an investigation or legal finding, and the individual was nevertheless retained by their academic institution. We focused on cases in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and France, drawing on additional international examples where relevant. Key sources included investigative news articles, university reports obtained via public records requests, court documents from related lawsuits, and reports in scholarly literature on academic misconduct. We excluded cases reported solely via informal channels (e.g. personal blogs or social media) unless later confirmed by reliable investigations.

We categorized cases by type of misconduct for analysis. “Sexual harassment and abuse” cases involve violations such as sexual harassment of students or staff, sexual assault, or other abuses of power in interpersonal conduct. “Research misconduct” cases involve fabrication, falsification, plagiarism, or related ethical breaches in scholarship. For each case, we documented the timeline of allegations, the findings of any inquiries, the institution’s disciplinary actions (or lack thereof), and the individual’s employment status outcome. All significant factual claims are supported with in-text citations to sources such as news reports, legal filings, or official statements. To ensure reliability, we avoided citation of self-published or non-editorially-reviewed sources (e.g., personal blog posts or informal online commentary).

By aggregating multiple cases, we performed a qualitative analysis to discern recurring themes in how universities handle misconduct by powerful faculty. These patterns, discussed in the later section on “Patterns of Institutional Protection,” emerged inductively from the case data. Finally, in the conclusion, we reflect on the systemic nature of the problem and recent developments (such as policy changes or increased public scrutiny) that aim to address it.

3. Case Studies

This section presents detailed case studies, grouped into two broad categories of misconduct: (1) sexual harassment and related abuses, and (2) research misconduct (scientific fraud and ethical breaches in research). Each case was selected because allegations were substantiated by investigations or credible evidence, yet the accused academic retained their position (or was later reinstated) despite the findings. The cases span multiple countries to illustrate that institutional protection is not isolated to a single academic system but is a cross-national phenomenon.

3.1. Sexual Harassment and Abuse Cases

Avital Ronell (NYU, United States) – Avital Ronell, a renowned professor of German and comparative literature at New York University, was found in 2018 to have sexually harassed a male graduate student, Nimrod Reitman, over a period of years[3][4]. A Title IX investigation concluded that Ronell’s conduct — which included unwelcome physical contact and extremely intimate communications to the student — was “sufficiently pervasive to alter” the conditions of the student’s learning environment[3][4]. NYU suspended Professor Ronell for one academic year without pay as a consequence[3][4]. Notably, the university did *not* terminate her employment. After her one-year suspension (2018–2019), Ronell returned to her faculty position in 2019, a decision that sparked protests from graduate students who argued that her continued employment put students at risk[5]. The case drew international attention not only because the accused was a female feminist scholar, but also due to the response of Ronell’s colleagues: several prominent academics wrote an open letter defending Ronell and urging leniency, emphasizing her stature and scholarly reputation[3]. This attempt by senior scholars to influence the outcome was widely criticized as an example of academe closing ranks around a famous figure[4]. Ronell’s case illustrated how even a confirmed finding of sexual harassment led to only a temporary suspension for a high-profile professor, followed by a full return to teaching duties.

John Comaroff (Harvard, United States) – John L. Comaroff, a prominent anthropology professor at Harvard University, was accused by multiple doctoral students of serial sexual harassment and

retaliation between 2017 and 2020[6]. Students alleged that Comaroff forcibly kissed and groped students without consent and threatened to sabotage their careers if they reported him[6]. Harvard initially placed Comaroff on paid administrative leave during a lengthy investigation. In January 2022, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences announced sanctions: Comaroff was found to have violated Harvard's professional conduct and harassment policies, and was placed on unpaid leave for one semester (Spring 2022) and barred from teaching required courses and taking on new advisees for one year[7]. However, the university did not dismiss him. Comaroff was allowed to resume teaching in Fall 2022 after his brief unpaid leave, albeit under certain restrictions[7]. This decision proved highly controversial. In February 2022, three women filed a federal lawsuit against Harvard, claiming the university had willfully ignored years of complaints about Comaroff and enabled his misconduct[6]. The lawsuit and student protests argued that Harvard's minimal sanctions were indicative of an institutional failure to protect students[6]. The case also revealed divisions among faculty: approximately 38 Harvard professors initially signed an open letter defending Comaroff as an "excellent colleague" and questioning Harvard's investigation, reflecting loyalty to a colleague; in response, about 73 other faculty signed a counter-letter supporting the students[6][7]. (After the lawsuit detailed Comaroff's alleged behavior in full, many of Comaroff's letter supporters withdrew their signatures[7].) Harvard's handling of Comaroff — a short suspension and eventual reinstatement, amid a public backlash — underscores how even well-substantiated harassment cases may result in limited punishment for star faculty.

Roland G. Fryer Jr. (Harvard, United States) – Another case at Harvard involved Roland Fryer, a prominent economics professor and recipient of the Clark Medal, who was investigated in 2018 for creating a hostile work environment through sexual harassment of employees in his research lab. Harvard's Office for Dispute Resolution found that Fryer had engaged in "unwelcome sexual conduct toward several individuals, resulting in the creation of a hostile work environment over the course of several years"[8]. In July 2019, Dean Claudine Gay announced severe sanctions: Fryer was placed on administrative leave without duties for two years, his laboratory was shut down, and for two additional years after leave he would be allowed to resume teaching and research only under strict supervision and probationary conditions[8]. This effectively sidelined him from 2019 through 2021. Importantly, however, Harvard did not terminate Fryer's tenure. In 2021, after the two-year suspension, the university restored Fryer's teaching and research privileges, with ongoing monitoring in place[9]. Fryer was permitted to return to the classroom and to his research, though he was barred from holding any advisory or supervisory positions for an additional two-year period and his teaching was subject to oversight[9]. Harvard's decision meant that Fryer returned to the faculty in good standing (albeit under probation) despite the confirmed findings of harassment[8]. The Fryer case illustrates a pattern of imposing finite suspensions for star faculty rather than permanent removal: Harvard levied what was described as a "two-year suspension for violating sexual harassment policies" followed by reinstatement[9]. Reactions were mixed; some praised the strong initial sanction, while others noted that Fryer's ability to return, given his stature, signaled that even serious misconduct might only temporarily derail a celebrated academic career.

Peter Thompson (Oxford, United Kingdom) – In the U.K., a case at the University of Oxford similarly highlights an institution's reluctance to permanently remove a harasser. Dr. Peter Thompson, an associate professor of history at Oxford and a fellow of St. Cross College, was the subject of multiple sexual harassment complaints by students starting in 2017[10]. A formal university investigation in 2020 upheld allegations that Thompson had engaged in inappropriate sexual behavior and comments toward students[10]. The university imposed a one-year suspension from his departmental duties as a penalty[10]. Notably, however, this suspension did not fully exclude Thompson from student contact: at the start of the 2021 academic year, he was still assigned undergraduate mentees at his college, and only after outcry were those students reassigned[10]. Thompson continued to hold his Oxford college fellowship throughout the process. An investigative podcast by *Al Jazeera* in late 2021 brought further public attention to Thompson's case[10]. Nonetheless, Oxford did not dismiss him;

he was able to resume at least some teaching and mentoring functions once the departmental ban lapsed. The Thompson case led to debate within Oxford about inconsistent handling of harassment, with critics arguing the university's fragmented collegiate system allowed an individual to evade full accountability (a department could suspend him, but a college could keep employing him)[10]. It demonstrates that even when complaints are validated, the outcome may be only a temporary or partial removal.

Prevalence of Lenient Outcomes: The above examples are representative of a broader trend. Investigative reports have found that it is common for faculty found to have violated sexual harassment policies to remain in academia. For instance, an analysis by researchers identified 221 faculty-student harassment cases in the U.S. (from public reports since 2000) that met a threshold of credibility (e.g., substantiated by investigations or lawsuits); more than half involved serious physical sexual misconduct (assault, groping, etc.), and nearly half involved multiple victims. Yet relatively few resulted in the professor being fired; in many instances, the offenders either received mild sanctions or were allowed to quietly resign and sometimes move to other institutions. The phenomenon of "passing the harasser" – wherein a university permits a known harasser to depart and obtain a job elsewhere without warning the new employer – was documented in at least 10 cases in that study[11]. In the UK, data obtained via Freedom of Information requests showed that during 2018–2024, the University of Cambridge upheld six complaints of sexual misconduct against staff, but only one offender was terminated; the other five kept their positions (often after a formal warning)[12]. These statistics underline that the outcomes in the Ronell, Comaroff, Fryer, and Thompson cases are far from isolated. Across different academic systems, universities have frequently opted for suspension, probation, or internal reprimand in sexual misconduct cases rather than dismissal of the faculty member.

3.2. Research Misconduct Cases

Carlo M. Croce (Ohio State University, United States) – Carlo Croce is a cancer researcher at Ohio State University (OSU) who has been celebrated for his contributions to oncology, including membership in the U.S. National Academy of Sciences. Beginning in the mid-2010s, however, Croce became the subject of numerous allegations of scientific misconduct, including data falsification and plagiarism in dozens of publications[1]. Investigations and whistleblower reports identified problematic images (suspected manipulated "Photoshopped" figures) in his papers[1]. By 2017, several of Croce's papers had been retracted for fraud or errors, and more than 20 had required corrections. A front-page *New York Times* article in 2017 reported that Croce had faced accusations of misconduct in more than 30 papers over decades[1]. Despite this extensive record, Ohio State repeatedly cleared Croce of personal wrongdoing. Internal OSU investigations did find that members of Croce's lab committed misconduct (plagiarism and data falsification were confirmed in at least two instances), but OSU "cleared Croce of misconduct" himself, opting only to discipline him for poor oversight of his laboratory[13]. As of 2022, Croce had accrued 11 retracted papers and 21 corrected papers, yet remained a faculty member in good standing. OSU had never taken formal disciplinary action against him such as suspension or removal[1]. Critics argue that OSU's handling of Croce reflected an institutional reluctance to punish a prominent scientist who brought in substantial research grants. Indeed, an OSU spokesperson openly acknowledged that the university itself "covet[s] research money" and largely polices misconduct internally[1]. Croce even went so far as to sue the *New York Times* for defamation over its reporting, but his lawsuit was dismissed in 2019[14], and concerns about his publications persisted. The Croce case exemplifies how an elite researcher with significant funding and prestige was effectively protected by his institution despite extensive documented misconduct.

David Latchman (Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom) – Professor David Latchman, a geneticist, has served as Master of Birkbeck, University of London since 2003. Under his previous role as a lab head at University College London (UCL) in the 1990s and early 2000s, dozens of scientific papers co-authored by Latchman have since been found to contain fabricated or manipulated data[15][2]. Anonymous whistleblowers alerted UCL to possible image manipulation in Latchman's

publications in 2013. UCL convened two separate expert panels (in 2014 and 2015) to investigate papers from Latchman's former laboratory[15]. These panels discovered evidence of fraud in a significant number of papers: one panel found fraudulent data in 8 out of 28 reviewed papers, and the second found fraud in 7 out of 32 papers[15]. While both inquiries concluded that Latchman himself did not directly fabricate data or necessarily know about the misconduct, they were scathing about his oversight. One report concluded that "whilst he did not intentionally commit the misconduct in research... his recklessness in the conduct of his laboratory and his involvement as author on many publications facilitated that misconduct," effectively upholding an allegation of research misconduct against him (for negligent supervision)[15]. Despite these findings—which some scientists described as constituting one of the worst cases of sustained research fraud in UK academia[15]—Latchman was not fired from either UCL or Birkbeck. A disciplinary hearing at UCL in 2018 decided that there were insufficient grounds to dismiss him or even to take formal action beyond a reprimand. Latchman continued in his role as Master of Birkbeck (a post with a salary of approximately £380,000) and retained his honorary professorship. This outcome prompted public criticism. In 2020, Professor John Hardy, a leading neuroscientist at UCL, spoke out to the press, expressing anger that "a lab that published systematically fraudulent science" over a decade saw "some minion carry the can" (junior staff took the blame) while the lead professor kept his position, adding that "the powerful get away with it" in such situations[2]. Hardy argued that Latchman should have been removed, noting, "As the senior author, he has to take responsibility... He should be fired from UCL and Birkbeck." The Latchman case illustrates a scenario of institutional inaction: even after two investigations confirmed pervasive misconduct in his lab and officially labeled his oversight as reckless, the university system imposed no meaningful penalty on the senior academic in charge. He remains in a leadership role, highlighting the gap between findings of wrongdoing and accountability.

Olivier Voinnet (CNRS, France/ETH Zurich, Switzerland) – Olivier Voinnet is a French plant molecular biologist who built a stellar career in the 2000s, including a faculty position at ETH Zurich and a research appointment with the French CNRS. In 2015, analyses of Voinnet's publications (many prompted by post-publication peer scrutiny online) revealed a pattern of manipulated figures. A CNRS investigation concluded that Voinnet had committed scientific misconduct by incorporating falsified or duplicated images in multiple papers. As a consequence, CNRS suspended Voinnet from his research duties for two years in 2015[16]. Several of his high-profile papers in journals like *Science* and *The Plant Cell* were retracted or corrected around this time. Notably, after serving the two-year suspension, Voinnet was permitted to resume his research career. By 2018, he returned to work (in a different CNRS-affiliated role) and began publishing again. The Voinnet affair was one of the highest-profile cases of research fraud in France, and the decision to suspend rather than dismiss him was controversial. Supporters argued that a suspension and supervision could rehabilitate his research practices, whereas critics felt that allowing him to continue in academia sent the wrong message about consequences for misconduct. In the context of this study, the Voinnet case shows a common resolution for scientific misconduct by star scientists: a time-limited sanction (temporary exclusion or demotion) but not a career-ending punishment.

Karl Lenhard Rudolph (Leibniz Institute, Germany) – In Germany, a prominent example of institutional leniency in a research misconduct case is that of Prof. Karl Lenhard Rudolph, a stem cell researcher and former director of the Leibniz Institute on Aging – Fritz Lipmann Institute (FLI) in Jena. In 2016–2017, allegations surfaced of image manipulation in a series of publications from Rudolph's lab. The Leibniz Association conducted a formal investigation, which in June 2017 concluded that multiple papers (published between 2001 and 2016) contained evidence of scientific misconduct. However, the inquiry also determined that Rudolph's actions were "grossly negligent" rather than willfully fraudulent. The executive board of the Leibniz Association imposed penalties on Rudolph that stopped short of dismissal: he was issued a written reprimand and removed from his directorial position, and his institute was barred from receiving certain internal research funds for three years[17]. Rudolph was also stripped of some administrative privileges (such as voting rights in Leibniz committees) for that

period. Importantly, he was not fired as a group leader; he was allowed to continue running a research group (under a new institute director) and to publish, after implementing required corrections and one retraction. This outcome demonstrates how a leading scientist in Germany found to have multiple instances of data manipulation in his lab still avoided expulsion from the scientific community. The institute and funding bodies chose a remedial approach (removal from management and temporary funding restrictions) rather than termination.

The above cases highlight a consistent theme: even when investigations validate serious misconduct allegations, universities and research organizations often opt for moderate sanctions that allow the faculty member to remain, rather than the maximum penalty of dismissal. Whether the misconduct is behavioral (harassment) or research-related, institutions appear inclined to preserve the careers of those involved—especially if they are high-status academics—after a relatively short period of penalty.

4. Patterns of Institutional Protection

Analyzing the case studies and additional documented incidents reveals several recurring patterns in how and why academic institutions protect employees who commit misconduct:

Minimal Sanctions and Quick Reinstatement: A striking commonality is the tendency to impose the lightest sanction perceived as acceptable, such as brief suspensions or formal warnings, rather than terminating employment. In sexual harassment cases (Ronell, Comaroff, Fryer, Thompson, among others), the institutions typically used short-term leaves or temporary bans from teaching as punishment, after which the professors were allowed to return to their roles[7]. Similarly, in research fraud cases (Croce, Latchman, Voinnet, Rudolph), the academics faced reprimands, loss of title, or suspension of duties for a defined period, but not an end to their affiliation. This approach suggests that universities often view misconduct as a transgression that can be remedied with time away rather than a breach of trust so severe that it warrants severing ties. Reintegration of the offender is often the default expectation once a nominal penalty has been served. Critics argue that such mild repercussions are disproportionate to the harm caused (to victims or to the integrity of the research record) and fail to deter future misconduct[2].

Reputation and Revenue Over Accountability: One of the most cited reasons for institutional reticence to fire high-profile academics is the protection of the institution's reputation and financial interests. Esteemed faculty often bring in significant research grants, draw in student enrollments, or contribute to an institution's prestige. In the Croce case, for example, Ohio State had strong incentives to retain a famous researcher whose work attracted millions in funding, leading observers to conclude that the university's desire to "covet research money" outweighed its willingness to enforce integrity[1]. Likewise, universities fear that openly firing a prominent professor for misconduct could damage their public image or raise questions about oversight within the institution. A report on French elite universities noted that administrators were "fearful of reputational damage" and thus inclined to downplay or quietly handle sexual violence cases to "preserve the beautiful image" of the school[19]. This dynamic results in internal pressure to contain scandals rather than expose and address them decisively. In multiple instances, institutions attempted to resolve matters confidentially: for example, the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) reportedly reached a private settlement with an accused professor (Gabriel Piterberg) in 2014 to suspend him quietly, until student protests later forced a public re-examination and ultimately his resignation[20]. The priority given to institutional prestige can come at the direct expense of accountability and justice.

Opaque and Internal Processes: Many universities handle faculty misconduct through internal tribunals or committees whose proceedings and outcomes are kept confidential. This opacity can shield both the individual and the institution from external scrutiny, making it easier to impose lenient penalties without public outcry. The Oxford case of Peter Thompson illustrated this: a confidential panel (Staff Employment Review Panel) issued only a "verbal warning" and allowed him to continue working with students, and the complainants were neither informed of the hearing details nor its

outcome due to confidentiality rules[18]. Similarly, at Cambridge, when staff were disciplined with warnings for sexual misconduct, those details remained largely internal until a student newspaper's FOI investigation exposed the pattern[12]. In research misconduct cases, institutions often conduct quiet inquiries and may not release full reports — UCL initially refused to release the Latchman investigation findings until pressured via the Freedom of Information Act 2000[15]. By controlling information, universities can manage fallout; however, this secrecy often erodes trust among students and faculty, who may feel that justice is not transparently served. It also means problematic individuals might be known within an institution but invisible to outsiders (including potential future employers or collaborators).

Defensiveness and Legal Liability Concerns: Universities frequently approach misconduct cases in a legalistic and defensive manner. Rather than viewing allegations purely as a matter of ethical duty to address, they are seen through the prism of institutional risk management. For example, in the Comaroff case, Harvard's investigators took the unusual step of accessing a complainant's private therapy records (without her permission) and revealing them to Comaroff, a move interpreted as gathering evidence to protect against potential lawsuits rather than to support the victim[6]. Such actions can intimidate complainants and signal that the university's primary interest is avoiding legal or financial liability. When students do sue — as in the Harvard case — universities typically deny wrongdoing and contest the claims in court, even if this means an adversarial posture toward harassment victims. This defensiveness may also manifest in non-disclosure agreements: faculty who are quietly pushed out are often given settlement packages in exchange for signing NDAs that prevent them from discussing the circumstances of their departure, which keeps the misconduct out of public view and eliminates an official finding on record.

Solidarity with Accused Colleagues (“Closing Ranks”): Another notable pattern is the solidarity often shown by other powerful academics toward a colleague accused of misconduct. This was seen when prominent scholars defended Avital Ronell and John Comaroff in open letters, emphasizing their professional achievements and casting doubt on the investigations[3][6]. In some cases, departmental peers or administrators may believe an accused star researcher is simply too valuable (scientifically or as a mentor) to lose, or they may personally trust the individual and disbelieve accusers. Such biases can influence disciplinary outcomes, consciously or not. The presence of celebrated professors on record defending someone can contribute to lighter penalties or second chances for the accused. This “old boys’ club” (or in Ronell’s case, an “old girls’ club”) phenomenon reflects a cultural issue: academic elites may identify with one of their own and thus rally to protect them, invoking their long careers and contributions as rationale for leniency. This can marginalize victims and whistleblowers, who often have far less status.

For example, after UCL found David Latchman responsible for reckless oversight of fraudulent research, some senior figures reportedly felt the matter should be put to rest given Latchman's stature, until external critics like John Hardy went public to demand accountability[2]. Similarly, at Harvard, it took a public lawsuit and media spotlight to prompt dozens of faculty to reconsider their initial instinct to support Comaroff unconditionally[7]. These incidents show that internal networks of influence can strongly color the initial response to misconduct allegations, often in favor of preserving a colleague's career.

Disempowerment of Victims and Whistleblowers: A troubling consequence of the above patterns is that those who suffer or observe misconduct frequently feel that the system is stacked against them. When a harasser or fraudster faces little consequence, it sends a chilling message. Indeed, surveys have found that a large proportion of student victims of harassment never report it to the university, believing it would be “useless” or fearing retaliation[19]. High-profile cases back up this pessimism: in instances like Comaroff's, students who did come forward experienced retaliation and then saw the harasser returned to power[6]. Whistleblowers in labs who raise concerns about data integrity (such as those in Latchman's lab or in Croce's case) often must do so anonymously and still risk career damage, while the senior person remains in place. Such outcomes contribute to a culture of silence.

The reluctance of institutions to decisively punish wrongdoers can thus perpetuate further misconduct: colleagues become aware that “the powerful get away with it”[2], and potential future offenders may not be deterred by the prospect of serious sanctions.

External Pressure as a Catalyst for Action: Notably, in several instances real accountability or change only occurred after external pressure mounted. Media investigations and public outrage have forced institutions to revisit initially lenient responses. For example, the University of Rochester initially cleared a professor (Florian Jaeger) of sexual harassment allegations, but after a group of faculty filed a complaint with federal authorities and the story became national news, the university president resigned and the professor eventually left under settlement. Similarly, UCLA only moved to terminate Gabriel Piterberg after students protested and details of his prior secret deal became public, leading to his resignation in 2017[20]. These examples highlight that universities often do the bare minimum until journalists, lawsuits, funding agencies, or public rankings pressure them into more decisive action.

In summary, the patterns of institutional protection in academia can be outlined as follows: powerful faculty members accused of misconduct frequently face internal processes that favor minimal, private sanctions; the value these individuals bring to the institution (prestige, funding) creates a strong motive for universities to retain them; a culture of collegial loyalty and risk-aversion often outweighs the demands of accountability; and only when outside oversight is applied do many institutions fully grapple with the misconduct in their ranks. The systemic nature of this issue suggests that isolated policy changes may not suffice without a broader cultural shift in academia regarding transparency and priorities.

5. Conclusion

The period from 2015 to 2025 has seen heightened awareness of misconduct in academia, from the rise of the #MeToo movement exposing sexual harassment to greater scrutiny of scientific integrity. This paper’s investigation into cases across the U.S., U.K., Germany, France and beyond reveals that institutional responses have often been inadequate, characterized by leniency and opacity. Prestigious universities and research institutes, when confronted with credible evidence of wrongdoing by esteemed faculty, have frequently chosen to protect those individuals (and by extension, their own reputations) rather than decisively enforce ethical standards. The result is a pattern of systemic failure: abusive professors remain in positions of power, and researchers who commit fraud continue to publish, eroding trust in academic institutions.

However, there are signs of a shifting landscape. Increased public and media attention has made it harder for universities to sweep problems under the rug. Survivors of harassment and junior whistleblowers, while still facing obstacles, have mobilized networks to support one another and bring accountability. In some countries, new policies have been implemented — for instance, several U.S. funding agencies and universities have started requiring disclosure of harassment findings, and France mandated that higher education institutions set up offices to handle sexual violence complaints[19]. The U.S. National Academies issued a major report in 2018 urging that sexual harassment be treated on par with research misconduct as a violation of scientific ethics, recommending clearer consequences and independent oversight. Likewise, research institutions are slowly adopting stronger research integrity frameworks that can lead to public retractions and employment consequences for fabrication or plagiarism.

Yet, as the cases in this study demonstrate, policy alone does not change culture. A true shift will require academic leadership to prioritize ethics and safety over short-term reputation management. Universities might need to relinquish some control to external investigatory bodies to avoid the inherent conflicts of interest in self-policing. Funding bodies and academic journals also play a role: by imposing their own sanctions (such as cutting off grants or publicizing misconduct findings), they can create additional accountability that pressures institutions to act. Moreover, as senior scholars like John Hardy did in the Latchman case, it is crucial for members of the academic elite to break the “code of silence” and hold their peers accountable, rather than defend the indefensible out of loyalty[2].

In the context of Wikipedia and public knowledge dissemination, documenting these cases with reliable sources serves an important purpose: it ensures that the historical record reflects not just the achievements of notable academics, but also the serious issues of misconduct and how institutions responded. Transparency is a first step toward reform. By openly discussing institutional protection and naming systemic failures, the academic community can better advocate for changes that ensure future allegations of misconduct are met with appropriate, proportionate action. The integrity of academia — and its social contract with students, staff, and society at large — depends on the principle that no individual is above accountability. The years 2015–2025 taught us that while that principle has been frequently undermined, continued vigilance, journalism, and advocacy can push universities toward a more just and ethical approach.

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