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Analysis of Whistleblowing in Academia

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Abstract. This paper aims to describe the status of whistleblowing channels in academic institutions as well as the perception that academics have towards the act of reporting unethical issues. Due to European legislation, organizations are obliged to provide reporting mechanisms. Our results show that a large number of individuals within the academic context suffer unethical issues. These results may trigger the possibility that academic institutions have been failing (i) to provide robust mechanisms to identify and investigate unethical behaviors in academia and (ii) to disseminate/discuss the act of reporting within students and staff. Taking into consideration the results and the reality that exists in academic institutions where demanding workload and stress promote environments where retaliations are expected, the authors discuss needs that institutions need to reflect on regarding compliance, integrity and ethics as well as forensic evidence that can be used in investigations in order to provide a safe space to report unethical issues that are observed or experienced.

Keywords: Whistleblowing; Academia; Wellbeing.

1. Introduction

Recently in Europe, Member States have been working to transpose the European Directive of Whistleblowing, with a December 2021 deadline. This legislation mandates that organizations with over 50 individuals must protect whistleblowers reporting irregularities. The Directive emphasizes protection and ensures

whistleblowers can report without fear throughout the process. Organizations like the Association of Certified Fraud Examiners (ACFE) and Transparency International (TI) advocate for whistleblower channels to prevent retaliation and promote best practices^{1,2}. However, academia lags in addressing this issue, creating gaps that foster victimization states³.

Research highlights the mental health toll of whistleblowing. A study comparing 27 whistleblowers with the general population found that 85% suffered from severe anxiety, depression, interpersonal sensitivity, and other issues, with 48% reaching clinical levels⁴. The lack of reporting tools exacerbates these impacts, contributing to conditions like anxiety, depression, and burnout.

Academia faces numerous unethical issues, including fraud, harassment, and discrimination. The OLAF report⁵ revealed €293m misused in EU research grants, while the Kif Report⁶ identified a lack of measures to counter harassment in European universities, particularly for mobile researchers lacking support. Academia's rigid hierarchies discourage individuals in junior positions from reporting misconduct. The EY Integrity Report⁷ similarly observed that junior employees feared reprisals, while board members underestimated these challenges.

High-profile cases illustrate these issues. At Murdoch University in Australia, whistleblowers faced retaliation after reporting unethical practices, leading to reliance on external protections⁸. In Spain, reports of misconduct led to severe reprisals, including death threats⁹. Conversely, a whistleblowing mechanism at Portugal's State Law School received 50 harassment-related reports within 15 days of implementation¹⁰.

Academia's stressful environment negatively impacts researchers' mental health. Studies reveal that postgraduate researchers are particularly vulnerable, with one in two PhD students experiencing psychological distress and 32% at risk of developing psychiatric disorders^{11,12}. Initiatives like COST Action ReMO emphasize the need for policies to improve mental health and address issues like whistleblowing^{13,14}.

Whistleblowing in academia demands urgent attention. Legislation like the European Directive, along with advocacy for effective reporting channels, highlights its importance. Yet, academic institutions must address barriers such as fear of reprisals and hierarchical structures. By fostering a culture of transparency and

accountability, academia can protect whistleblowers, address misconduct, and promote well-being^{15,16}.

2. Materials and methods

In order to understand the state of whistleblowing mechanisms within academia and the academics' perceptions on this topic, within this study, two research activities were conducted. Firstly, it explored the existence of reporting tools within academic institutions. The second research activity attempted to identify and analyze academics' perceptions regarding these mechanisms within their academic institutions.

This research was approved by the Ethics Committee at IFA. The Ethics Board at IFA is composed of three external individuals of the entity and a moderator for cases where common ground is not achieved. The moderator of the Ethics Committee also acts as IFA's Gender, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Coordinator. Participants were informed in both survey activity and focus groups that they could withdraw from the research at any moment by contacting the research team by email.

2.1 Research activity 1: exploring the existence of whistleblowing mechanism within academia

For this activity, ninety-six universities were selected based on their Shanghai Ranking position. This ranking was used as it is globally acknowledged by academic institutions regarding academic prestige and quality. Three tiers were created and an equal number of universities – 32 academic institutions – from the base (tier 1), middle (tier 2) and top positions (tier 3) of the ranking were selected. Institutions were based in 26 countries (Angola, Argentina, Cambodia, Canada, Chad, China, Denmark, Egypt, U.S., Indonesia, Israel, Maldives, Malta, Nigeria, New Zealand, Philippines, Portugal, Russia, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Turkey, Ukraine, and UK). For the purpose of analysis, the position of each country within the 2021 Corruption Perception Index was considered².

After selecting the universities, a digital content analysis was conducted within the academic institutions websites and online platforms using searches of combinations of the following keywords: Hotline; Whistle blow; Whistleblower; Complain(t); Confidential; Ethic(s); Unethical; Integrity; Irregularity; Anonymous; Private(cy); Report; Emergency Telephone; Governance; Fraud; Harassment;

Misconduct; Regulation; Violation and Policy. Combinations could include two or three keywords (e.g., whistleblower violation harassment). Searches were conducted (1) using software tools to locate digital places (i.e., web pages) where contents related to the selected topics could be verified, and (2) by using the search tool within the websites that were being investigated. Within each university, administrative offices were also attempted to contact by email regarding the existence of whistleblowing channels, however, replies for this action were less than 5% for these inquiries, hence, this type of data collection was dismissed as potential data. Analysis was conducted within the institutions where a whistleblowing mechanism was identified to verify which type(s) of communication were supported and whether the communication could be anonymous or not.

2.2 Research activity 2: academics' perceptions of whistleblowing mechanisms within academia and their impact on mental health

For this activity we performed two tasks. Primarily we conducted a survey with 258 academics regarding perceptions of topics related to whistleblowing within academia. Demographics of the sample are presented in Table 1. After accessing the data from the survey, we conducted five focus groups with a group of 32 academics from different institutions that participated in one event where a discussion was promoted regarding whistleblowing within academia and its impact on academics' mental health. Participants of the focus groups did not have to complete the survey to be invited to this event. The topics that were investigated within these focus groups were related to (i) impact in individuals' mental health throughout the reporting process, (ii) characteristics of a reporting tool within academia and (iii) types of support for whistleblowers within academia.

Table 1. Characteristics of whistleblowing channels in selected universities (N = 96).

Age	
Mean	21,9
SD	2,0
Field of study	
Psychology	17%
Sociology	21%
Management	15%
Physics	17%
Engineering	20%
Medicine	10%

Degree	
BSc	27%
MSc	28%
PhD	45%

3. Results

3.1 Exploring the existence of whistleblowing mechanism within academia

It is possible to observe in Figure 2 results showing that from the global population of academic institutions that were selected less than half (n=47) did have a whistleblowing mechanism that was identified within their public webpage. From these groups of institutions that provided a mechanism to report unethical issues, only four provided the usage of digital platforms that are recognized in the compliance market. The majority provided only the usage of an email (n=16). Physical offices were present in only one institution as well as the usage of fax. The reporting of unethical issues through a written form was available within six institutions. Moreover, there were 12 institutions that provided information regarding the possibility to use a mediator within the organization. From the reporting possibilities that were found in these institutions, only 22 allowed the reporting to be anonymous. Regarding this aspect of the reporting process, there were 12 institutions of the 25 that did not allow anonymity that obliged the whistleblower to identify themselves through the reporting process. Information regarding individuals that did not identify themselves mentioned that their report would not be taken into consideration.

3.2 Academics' perceptions of whistleblowing mechanisms within academia and its impact on mental health

3.2.1 Survey

Within the survey, results presented in Table 3 showed that more than half of individuals did have a sense that they were encouraged to report unethical issues within their academic institution (57%). For these individuals, a large majority (70%) indicated that their institutions provided mechanisms to report unethical issues. However, when asked if they were aware of which mechanism to blow the whistle could be used in the event of reporting unethical issues, more than half yelled negatively (62%). Regarding the possibility of reports being anonymous, only 39% believed that could be possible. When individuals were asked if they had knowledge

about unethical issues within their institution, 37% mentioned having knowledge, 48% mentioned they did not and 15% preferred not to answer. Regarding the unethical issues that individuals observed, 504 issues were pointed out as observed in the past. The majority was related to “abuse of power” (n=211), “fraud” was the second most indicated issue (n=77), followed by “bullying” (n=73), “harassment” was pointed out 41 times by respondents and “corruption” about 28 times. “Other” issues were also pointed out 74 times.

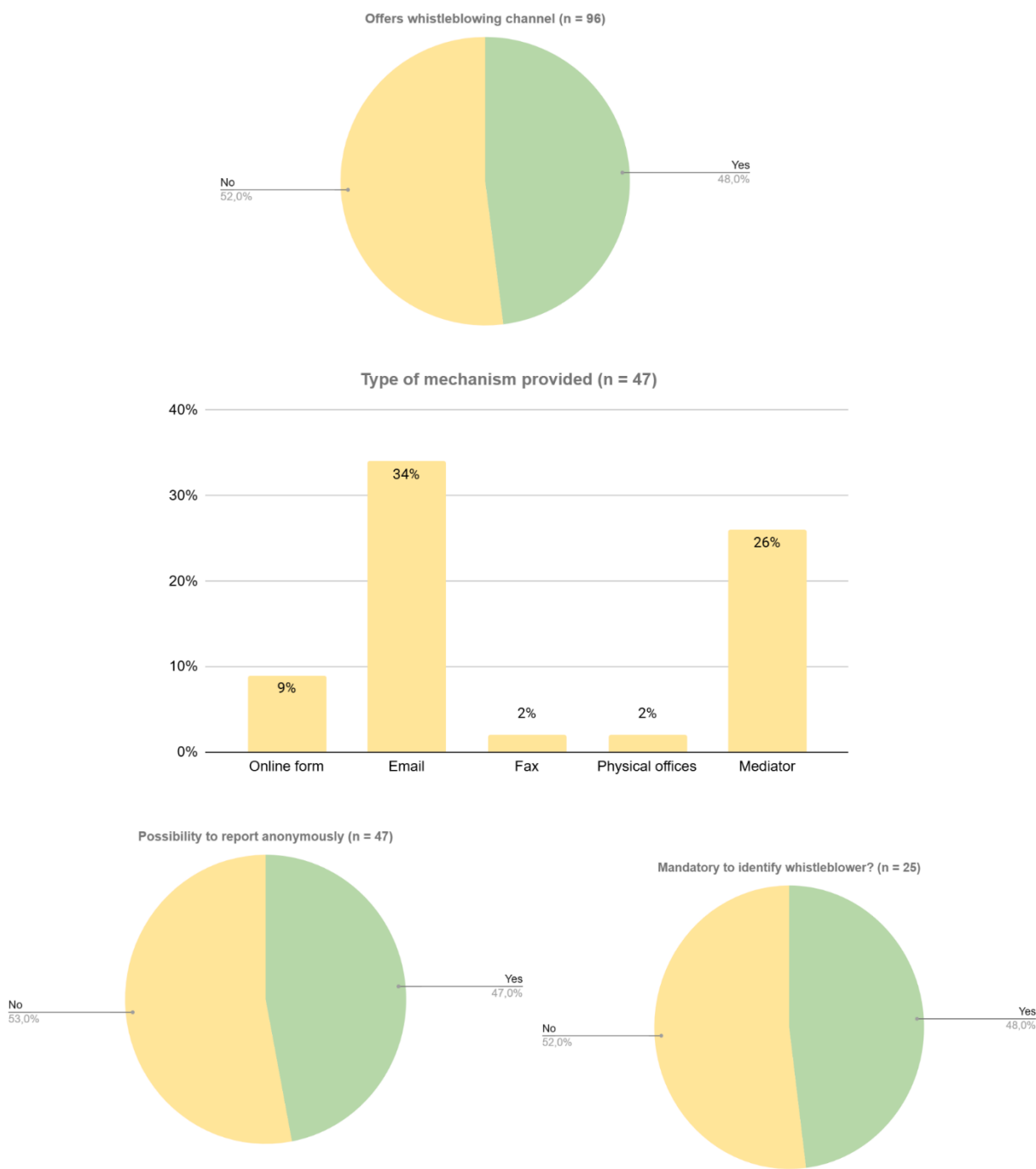


Figure 2. Answers about the existence of whistleblowing mechanisms within academia.

Table 3. Individuals' perceptions regarding the act of reporting unethical issues (N = 258).

I feel encouraged to report unethical issues in my academic institution	
Yes	57%
No	43%
Prefer not to answer	N/A
I have knowledge that my university provides whistleblowing mechanisms	
Yes	70%
No	30%
Prefer not to answer	N/A
In the event that I have to report unethical issues, I know how to proceed	
Yes	38%
No	62%
Prefer not to answer	N/A
I have knowledge of unethical issues in my organization that have happened or are happening to me or to other people	
Yes	37%
No	48%
Prefer not to answer	15%
The irregularities that I am aware of are related to the following topics	
Fraud	77
Harassment	41
Bullying	73
Abuse of power	211
Conflict of interests	74
Corruption	28

3.2.2 Focus groups

In the five focus groups, a thematic analysis was performed, and main topics were identified. For the first concept regarding the impact of the whistleblowing process in individuals' mental health, groups pointed out that reporting unethical issues "can be extremely difficult" and "energy demanding", which was also identified as a "risk factor for one's mental health". Regarding any symptomatology that can be identified, participants mentioned clinical terminology that was associated with symptoms of anxiety, despair, depression, and ultimately self-injury. When thinking about how someone can feel about the process of reporting unethical issues within an academic environment, the terms that were most identified were related to loneliness and isolation. When the groups were invited to discuss the characteristics of a

whistleblowing tool within an academic context, individuals agreed that such a tool should be independent and provide confidentiality. Regarding the safety that the tool should provide, participants mentioned that there should be a non-retaliation procedure. When discussing if anonymity was something of value, groups could not agree unanimously. Clusters of both sides were identified with different types of arguments. Where some subgroups referred that anonymity was something of value due to the protection it provides to whistleblowers, enabling them to feel safe and with a diminished fear of potential retaliations, others claimed that anonymity could become a way for individuals to raise false declarations without taking any responsibilities. Within the discussion of this topic, both subgroups agreed to the possibility of having one entity that could receive reports from academics when they do not have any feedback and follow-up on their reports. When asked to explore more this idea, participants referred that such institutions could be funding bodies or other types of organizations at an international level. Finally, when individuals were asked to provide insight regarding the type of support that authors of reports should benefit from, three main possibilities were identified: (1) legal support by law experts, (2) well-being support by mental health experts and peer support (e.g., groups of peers that have passed by the same experience).

4. Discussion

Although our study did not perform advanced statistics by correlating research questions, we did not find any study that focused its attention on academic whistleblowing and the impact on mental health, hence we believe this study can be a first step to (a) address the need to yell for whistleblowing mechanisms in academia and (b) start to identify potential risks in academics' mental health during the experience of reporting unethical issues.

When verifying the transposition of the European directive in the countries that already performed the announcement of the whistleblowing law, we observed a potential loophole. Legally, this reporting mechanism was designed to address organizations' employees. Administratively, students as well as some research staff might not be considered employees within universities. This could make the process of reporting issues difficult for these individuals in these roles. However, a broader view on the best practices related to the act of reporting unethical issues^{1,2}, informs that whistleblowing mechanisms can also be accessed by key stakeholders. If we

consider that students are not employees but for instance clients (once they pay tuition fees) and precarious staff like some research roles are business partners, one can consider that these individuals are essential stakeholders, hence they should be allowed to use such a reporting mechanism. This would decrease the number of universities that offer as an option to students to report unethical issues to the so-called student ombudsman.

We have identified in our study that less than half of the selected universities did have a whistleblowing mechanism that was easily accessed by students or by the public in general. Moreover, part of the sample only allowed reports to be issued in person and with staff members who also lecture/teach and were allocated by the university. This type of setup puts at risk the impartiality and independence of such a process once promoting a conflict of interest between allocated staff and known colleagues. We have three suggestions to mitigate the risks of such a model. The investment and efforts to implement each are different, as well as the advantages and disadvantages. The first suggestion would be to define a committee which is represented by different individuals from different roles such as lectures, administrative staff, and students. Our second option is to invite independent individuals, external to the university, to join the committee mentioned previously promoting even more the independence of the process. Lastly, external management of whistleblowing channels can be a solution, nevertheless, requiring higher financial investment. There are no perfect solutions to handle whistleblowing reports, neither one shall consider that one solution that works in one place will perfectly work in another without any adjustments. We strongly recommend the discussion on this topic to start with all involved stakeholders once the risks can be extremely difficult to handle. In this study we discuss some risks associated with the impact on mental health of whistleblowers, which are associated with other types of risks for the organizations such as reputational risks and financial risks. Universities that do not make accountable their responsibilities to promote integrity and transparency are expected to face greater challenges in retaining high performers (either students or staff), as well as promoting their wellbeing which translates into poorer performances. Sir Malcolm Grant once said about universities that they are “Academia is the lifeblood of a flourishing society, where ideas are nurtured, knowledge is shared, and the foundations for a better future are laid”. However, from a business point of view, it is understandable that universities also need to manage their business models, and if

they lack reputation, their financial well-being will suffer either by lower levels of student applications, staff retention and/or due to the decrease of funding retention.

In Europe, the Whistleblowing Directive is very straight. Anonymity should be considered when countries transpose the law. Most of the countries that already transposed the law included the capacity to grant anonymity for authors of reports. This is contradictory to what we have observed. In our sample, less than a fourth of universities did allow reports to be anonymous. Obliging whistleblowers to identify themselves has been demonstrated to be a variable that decreases individuals' willingness to step up and report unethical issues, and even can make individuals less prone to comply with internal obligations in their institutions as claimed in the past¹⁷. Results from our survey showed that roughly one third of participants believed that anonymity was possible to be maintained. This insight empowers us to claim that more than being aligned with legislation, universities implementing whistleblowing channels that allow anonymity must communicate that feature. We suggest a communication plan that may include high level activities such as general webinars to deep dive sessions or small forums with specific individuals explaining the mechanism that is implemented as well as the entire process. Providing insight on how whistleblowing channels work is extremely important and must consider key messages in order to prevent individuals from having negative expectations. Some of the individuals that participated in the focus groups claimed that enabling anonymity could trigger false accusations. Although this can be true, it can be mitigated if (i) organizations ensure they have a robust procedure, promoting a non-retaliation policy, as well as an impartial and independent analysis to safeguard any individual or organization that is identified in one report and (ii) implement corrective measures that trigger consequences for any misuse of whistleblowing mechanisms. Corporate organizations⁷ have found that rigid and unaware hierarchies can compromise the possibility to feel safe when reporting unethical issues as junior positions have five times more apprehension to believe that whistleblowing channels are not entirely safe to use. On the other hand, a great majority of top positions (e.g., CEOs, Directors, Chairpersons) have the opposite belief, i.e., these roles agreed that most individuals would be comfortable and safe in use reporting mechanisms. In our study we could not compare perceptions between junior and senior roles once the survey we conducted was mostly responded to by students, however, more than half of the participants in our survey said they did not have knowledge on how to report

unethical issues if they needed to. Moreover, more than half claimed that it was not clear for them if they could stay anonymous when reporting a case. These insights are in line with the importance that was given to the possibility of being anonymous which part of the participants of the focus group also referred to.

The results of the survey that was conducted in this study showed that 37% of participants observed or experienced unethical issues throughout their academic experience. In total, 509 unethical issues were reported, i.e., our respondents experienced or observed more than 5 unethical issues during their academic journey. The scope of reports that organizations usually acknowledged within their whistleblowing policies were related to financial wrongdoing. However, more actions have been taken into consideration regarding issues related to ESG dimensions (Environment, Sustainability and Governance). Additionally, the launch of the European directive included other topics related to personal harm such as harassment and discrimination. Within the academic sector, a vast number of cases related to harassment have been claimed in different studies, reports, and even in the media^{9,10}. Cases related to bullying in academia also started to yell for attention from the research community¹⁸. This is in line with what we found in our survey which showed that harassment and bullying combined were observed or experienced 114 times. Despite the fact that academic institutions may have different structures when compared to big corporations, these institutions are required to comply with European laws too, hence they should be providing whistleblowing channels to their staff and other students. In our study some of the universities that were investigated were based outside Europe. This study did not attempt to make an analysis between the institutions' ranks and the capacity to respond to unethical issues using whistleblowing channels. However, we observe that rankings such as the Shanghai ranking or other national ranks like the REF have not fully acknowledged topics related to dimensions like integrity and transparency. Our reflection is that these rankings could support the promotion of these dimensions mainly for two reasons. This is in line with previous research¹⁷ when addressing how the topic of unethical issues should be tackled at institutional level. Firstly, all academic research seems intertwined, meaning that universities which do not acknowledge the previous aspects are expected to suffer losses, either human and/or financial losses. Secondly, and perhaps most importantly, academic institutions that ignore to promote these dimensions will perpetuate what academics have named as the academic

feudalism, making it more difficult to transform and evolve the academic environment to be fairer and just as well as to make it pleasurable to engage with either for a career or with partnerships with stakeholders.

4.1. Reinforcing the investigation process of whistleblowing reports in academia using forensic evidence

The investigation of whistleblowing reports in academia can greatly benefit from the integration of forensic evidence, which enhances both the credibility and reliability of the process. Forensic methodologies, particularly digital forensics, offer robust tools for examining and verifying evidence, such as authenticating electronic communications, analyzing documentation trails, and ensuring the integrity of submitted materials. These tools provide an objective basis for investigations while safeguarding whistleblowers' anonymity and mitigating risks of retaliation. The use of digital forensics has been well-documented as a reliable means of ensuring data authenticity and protecting sensitive information^{19,20}.

In the context of academic institutions, forensic methodologies support a structured and impartial approach to addressing misconduct. Digital forensics ensures that investigations align with ethical principles of justice and confidentiality, particularly in protecting the identities of whistleblowers. Anonymity is a key factor in fostering a culture where individuals feel safe to report unethical behavior, which aligns with broader bioethical principles such as beneficence and non-maleficence^{21,22}.

The process of investigating whistleblowing reports is a complex and time-consuming procedure. Investigation teams must address the evidence considering cognitive biases that may arise from the contextual information in order to prevent errors. By integrating forensic tools into whistleblowing mechanisms, academic institutions can reinforce accountability and transparency while addressing challenges like false accusations.

In the presence of a false accusation, investigation teams must consider the integration of a credibility assessment if that is possible. Usually this type of assessment is conducted by a forensic psychologist that assesses the credibility of the testimony using validated techniques that are recognized scientifically²³. Robust forensic practices enhance trust among stakeholders and ensure that whistleblowing channels are used effectively as well as safe for the entire community instead of

being seen only as potential starting points of conflicts and accusations without evidence. Furthermore, these methodologies can serve as a foundation for developing standardized protocols tailored to the unique complexities of academic environments.

Future research should explore the broader adoption of forensic methodologies within academia to strengthen the integrity of whistleblowing processes. This integration would represent a significant step toward ensuring transparency and ethical conduct in academic institutions while safeguarding the mental well-being of individuals involved in these critical processes.

4.2. Exploring the bioethical dimensions of whistleblowing in Academia

Whistleblowing within academic institutions presents complex bio-ethical considerations, particularly concerning the ethical duty to report misconduct, the moral obligations of institutions to protect whistleblowers, and the ethical dilemmas faced by potential whistleblowers. The ethical duty to report wrongdoing is grounded in the principles of beneficence and justice, obligating individuals to prevent harm and promote fairness. In academia, this duty compels members to disclose unethical practices that could compromise research integrity or harm individuals. However, this responsibility often conflicts with personal risks, such as retaliation or career jeopardy, leading to significant ethical dilemmas for potential whistleblowers. While whistleblowing is morally permissible, it is not always obligatory, especially when safe reporting mechanisms are absent²⁴.

Institutions bear a moral obligation to create environments that encourage ethical conduct and protect those who report misconduct. This includes implementing policies that ensure confidentiality and safeguard against retaliation, aligning with the ethical principles of nonmaleficence and respect for autonomy. Effective whistleblowing mechanisms not only fulfill legal requirements but also uphold ethical standards by fostering a culture of transparency and accountability²⁵.

Potential whistleblowers often face ethical conflicts when deciding whether to report, balancing personal safety against the collective responsibility to maintain institutional integrity. Bioethical analysis highlights the importance of public accountability and the role-based obligations of individuals within organizations. This perspective suggests that the duty to report is contingent upon one's role and the presence of safe reporting channels²⁶.

Addressing the bio-ethical dimensions of whistleblowing in academia requires a nuanced understanding of individual rights and collective responsibilities. Institutions must develop comprehensive policies that protect whistleblowers and promote ethical behavior, thereby reinforcing their commitment to integrity and the well-being of the academic community.

5. Conclusion

Our final reflections aim to suggest initiatives that can prevent clinical symptoms related to poor mental health of academic whistleblowers. Change seems to be needed and urgent to the act of whistleblowing unethical cases in academia. Previous research pointed out the complexity that an academic environment enables [3], and the difficulty of reporting unethical issues within such an environment. As found in our first research activity and also within the survey we conducted, academic institutions are in the moment to address this issue and to promote integrity and transparency when preventing and investigating unethical cases. Not doing that may lead to mental health symptomatology that either previous research⁴ and our focus groups addressed, such as symptoms of anxiety, despair, and depression, and leading into behaviors of self-isolation and perhaps self-harming. Whilst some unethical issues like fraud have not been thoroughly studied regarding its correlation with poor mental health, others have been largely associated with poor mental health and the symptoms above mentioned, namely harassment, discrimination, abuse of power or bullying. Some clusters within the academic scene have been targeted as risk groups already regarding their mental health¹². Nevertheless, we believe that further studies will find out that these situations exist across all types of roles within academic institutions, from top to bottom. Perhaps what was claimed in the focus groups has reason to be heard, specifically the need to create an independent body which would centralize whistleblowing cases in academia. Having this body developed could work as a watchdog, preventing cases to rise by manifesting the possibility to have them public, promote the interest of universities to promote good practices as well as providing individuals with assurance that their case would be taken into consideration and would be used to promote change.

We also tend to agree with participants in our qualitative activity and their suggestion to enhance means to support individuals' mental health and legal advice. Considering the importance of promoting independence, we tend to follow the

benefits of external resources for this kind of support or at least hybrid models to pursue those goals. Finally, we recap the need to assess organizations globally as claimed in the past¹⁶. It is of extreme importance that organizations take into consideration what research^{15,16,27} has suggested in the past but eventually has forgotten; the need to assess individuals and their collective perceptions regarding the topics of ethics and integrity.

Organizations are different, and are made of people, who have their own perceptions. It is impossible to address the topic of preventing unethical issues with a one size fits all model, instead, we suggest that organizations replicate what we have done in this study, i.e., using a mixed method approach to analyze their culture of integrity and understand the best way to disseminate good practices amongst their communities integrating a bottom-up approach with the classical use of top-down communication and strategy.

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