

# THIS WEEK

## EDITORIALS

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## Harassment on China's campuses

*A string of cases at Chinese universities shows a system that is trying to address concerns and implement change, but still has some way to go.*

Some 20 years ago, a student at Peking University in Beijing took her own life after making allegations that she had been sexually harassed and raped by a professor. Her case made little impact at the time, but it is doing so now. The issues it raises highlight two points about how the #MeToo movement is now playing out on the campuses of Chinese universities. It shows the extent to which things have changed, and underlines ways in which these changes do not yet go far enough.

The student was called Gao Yan. When friends and supporters last month highlighted the anniversary of her death, Peking University confirmed that an investigation at the time had criticized Shen Yang, a famed linguist at the university, for having an inappropriate six-month relationship with her, which he ended nine months before her suicide. Shen could not be reached by *Nature*. He told Chinese media the accusations against him were untrue. After the case was made public last month, he was fired from his post at Shanghai Normal University.

Peking University, which Shen left in 2011, also posted previously unreleased documents disclosing some details of its 1998 investigation into the case. And it published statements that noted recent efforts, including the introduction in 2016 of a 'teacher's handbook' to reinforce the ethics of its professors and draft regulations concerning sexual harassment on campus (currently under consideration). The institution deserves some credit for these efforts, albeit two decades on. There are many other universities — in China and elsewhere — that stick their heads deep in the sand when controversy arises, on sexual harassment, scientific misconduct or other matters.

That the university felt the need to respond to public pressure at all, never mind to issue statements and attempts at reassurance over a historic case, gives some indication of how things are changing for the better in China. Awareness of harassment, and intolerance for harassers, is certainly on the rise there, as in many places. A string of well-publicized sexual-harassment cases has hit university campuses in China in recent months, and senior academics accused of improper behaviour have lost their positions or faced other sanctions.

The shift goes beyond academia, too. Some technology companies have been forced to apologize for discriminatory hiring policies that target attractive women, and for advertisements that boast about the beauty of their female employees.

Together, the public airing of these cases is a positive development. Unsavoury activity is being exposed and, to some extent, those found guilty are receiving penalties that might deter others from similar behaviour. This could signal that China is reaching a new stage of transparency, where such issues can be discussed and sexual harassment will no longer be tolerated. But there are still many reasons to be concerned.

Following the response from Peking University over the Gao Yan case, a group of current students there pressed the university for more details. Since then, one of them — Yue Xin — has complained on social media that university officials have pressured her to stop

asking for the information. Her allegations have made headlines and yielded statements of support from around the world. They have partly overshadowed official celebrations of the university's 120-year anniversary this month. And, in response, the university's newfound openness is faltering — numerous attempts to contact the institution have gone unanswered. Meanwhile, students say that posters they have put up around campus voicing support for Yue have been quickly removed.

**“Awareness of harassment, and intolerance for harassers, is certainly on the rise.”**

Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Peking University last week. Ironically, he praised it as the birthplace of the 1919 May Fourth movement, a series of student protests that triggered wide social and political unrest and ultimately produced the nation's communist leaders.

Concerns over the response to the student protests must be addressed. It is one thing for universities to state that sexual harassment will not be tolerated. It is another entirely for them to buy into the kind of wholesale changes in regulations, behaviour and attitude that are required. The #MeToo movement is growing into an irresistible force. Now is not the time for universities — in China or elsewhere — to act like immovable objects. ■

## Crowd scene

*Satisfying symmetry between an unusual test of quantum physics and peer review of its findings.*

Wednesday, 30 November 2016, saw crowds of Cubans line the streets of Havana to say a final farewell to Fidel Castro. On the same day, fans gathered to watch Spanish football minnows Hércules hold giants Barcelona to a surprise one-all draw in their Copa del Rey tie. And a crowd of 100,000 people around the world came together over an online video game to type in a series of 0s and 1s as fast as their fingers could fly, to put to the test a central feature of quantum mechanics.

The gamers were part of a day-long experiment called the BIG Bell Test, the results of which are described on page 212 (The BIG Bell Test Collaboration. *Nature* 557, 212–216; 2018). The findings were produced in an unusual way and, with the symmetry that one would expect from a beautiful physics theory, they were reviewed for publication in an unusual way, too.

Less than a year after the test, the BIG Bell Test paper landed for review from *Nature* on the desk of Sabrina Maniscalco, a physicist at the University of Turku in Finland. Seeing the crowdsourced public input it contained, Maniscalco decided to crowdsource the requested