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DAVID SOLIM



The University of Adelaide suspended Alan Cooper as leader of the prestigious Australian Centre for DNA following an investigation.

RESEARCH CULTURE

Anxiety mixed with great science in troubled DNA lab

Researchers say lab leader Alan Cooper, who was suspended last week, bullied them.

BY DYANI LEWIS

The University of Adelaide has suspended the leader of its ancient-DNA centre, Alan Cooper, following an investigation into the ‘culture’ at the Australian laboratory. The university has not given a reason for its decision, but current and former co-workers of Cooper — an award-winning evolutionary biologist who specializes in human migration — have told *Nature* that he bullied them and others.

Their accounts paint a picture of a lab that was exciting scientifically — but that had a toxic work environment. Former student Nic Rawlence says he was bullied while at the Australian Centre for Ancient DNA (ACAD) and developed stress-induced health issues. Another former student, Dean Male, says he left the lab as a result of Cooper’s bullying. “I couldn’t get out of there fast enough,” he says.

Nature interviewed nine of Cooper’s current and former co-workers. Four — including one current team member — say that he bullied

them; four more, two of whom still work at the centre, say that they observed him bullying team members. Most of those people requested anonymity for fear of damaging their academic careers. Three of those who allege that Cooper bullied them gave evidence to the investigation, as did two of those who say they observed it.

Another former colleague, Paul Brotherton, told *Nature* that although Cooper is brash, he is not a bully. Cooper could be disdainful towards someone and their work if it wasn’t ▶

▶ going to lead to a high-profile publication, he says. “Perhaps he’s not very good at disguising his impatience and his lack of interest.”

Some of the people *Nature* spoke to say they had complained before but that things did not change. Others say they did not make formal complaints for fear that Cooper would find out and the bullying would get worse.

Rawlence says he’s “cautiously optimistic” that the university’s decision to suspend one of its most prominent scientists is a sign that the allegations against Cooper are being taken seriously. But others are sceptical that the university will take further action or that the situation will improve, citing the funding that Cooper brings in, and the fact that previous complaints seem to have had little effect. In 2016, Cooper was named South Australian Scientist of the Year. He has also been awarded millions of dollars in highly competitive grants from the Australian Research Council.

Several of the researchers say that the university should permanently remove Cooper as leader of ACAD, which has about 36 staff and students, according to its website. “He is just going to tear up lives as long as he’s in that role,” says one former student.

At the time of publication, Cooper had not responded to *Nature*’s request for comment.

Cooper is a pioneer of ancient-DNA research, and his work to improve extraction techniques in the mid-1990s transformed the field. In 2001, he sequenced the first full mitochondrial genome from an extinct animal, two species of the New Zealand moa (*Emeus crassus* and *Dinornis giganteus*; A. Cooper *et al. Nature* **409**, 704–707; 2001). He has also characterized plaque on ancient teeth to understand changes in early-human diet across Europe (C. J. Adler *et al. Nature Genet.* **45**, 450–455; 2013). A project he leads to sequence the genomes of Indigenous Australian groups was awarded a prestigious Australian Museum Eureka Prize in 2017.

NIGHTMARE LAB

Cooper’s suspension comes after the university engaged SAE Consulting in Adelaide to conduct a ‘culture check’ of ACAD in July. Cooper was not named as a focus of the probe, and the university did not say what prompted it, but on 19 August, ACAD students and staff were notified of Cooper’s suspension. “Following on from the information provided, the University has decided to take further action,” a spokesperson for the university told *Nature*. Cooper will remain suspended pending “the outcome of further processes”, the statement read.

Rawlence was at ACAD from 2006 to 2013 and gave evidence to the investigation. He says Cooper would yell at him, sometimes

in front of colleagues, and criticize his work. “It was pretty much an everyday occurrence,” says Rawlence, who now leads a lab at the University of Otago in Dunedin, New Zealand.

Male, who was a senior researcher at ACAD



Nic Rawlence alleges that Alan Cooper bullied him at ACAD.

from 2006 to 2007 and did not give evidence to the investigation, says his experience of working in the world-class lab was marred by Cooper’s bullying. “It was fantastic science, really breathtaking, cutting-edge stuff,” he said. Cooper often targeted the most vulnerable people in the lab, according to Male, who still works in research but has left academia.

Male recalls hearing Cooper’s shouting from behind his closed office door, and was himself yelled at several times. “He’d kind of stalk and walk a bit, warming up, and then the door would close and he’d be behind you and it was actually quite intimidating, and then the shouting and yelling would start,” he says.

Cooper’s criticisms of students’ work were unconstructive and tinged with personal insults, according to a former ACAD student who witnessed Cooper bullying others. “It borders on cruel because it’s just so relentless and not everyone is subjected to it,” they say.

The current ACAD student who accuses Cooper of bullying them and who gave evidence to the investigation told *Nature* in an e-mail that they were surprised when they came out of a meeting unscathed. “I was frequently paralysed by anxiety and feelings of inadequacy.”

Some students say Cooper took an unusually long time to read their papers and theses — sometimes several months — and was slow to sign paperwork that allowed them to graduate.

Rawlence says he had to lodge a

formal complaint to the then-dean of graduate studies, Richard Russell, to get Cooper to read his PhD thesis so that he could complete his studies. Rawlence says Cooper then complied.

Rawlence and another former student who alleges they were bullied say they told their postgraduate coordinator about Cooper, and were informed that the university was aware of problems with his behaviour. They also say they complained to the university’s management. The university did not indicate to them whether any steps had been taken to address the grievances, they say.

Another former student says they left without completing their studies partly owing to Cooper’s behaviour.

But Brotherton, who worked as a postdoc with Cooper at the University of Oxford, UK, and later at ACAD, doesn’t think Cooper is a bully. In his opinion, many of the alleged incidents are about personality differences. “[Alan] won’t win empathetic boss of the year competition, but he’s not a savage bully,” says Brotherton, who no longer works in academia. He

does say, however, that Cooper can be “quite abrasive and in-your-face”, and that behaviours such as taking less interest in some people’s projects are sins of “omission rather than commission”.

AIRING GRIEVANCES

Most of the people whom *Nature* interviewed say that they were relieved when the university launched the culture check. But some have also questioned whether the scope of the investigation was too narrow. Rawlence and several other former students say that, initially, only current students were asked to participate.

Rawlence ended up participating only because colleagues currently at the centre alerted some former students to the probe, which prompted him and some others, he says, to contact the consultant leading the investigation, SAE Consulting’s Sophie Rayner. But because the university didn’t initially approach former students, some of the students worry that the probe might have missed accounts from past members of the lab.

Others complain that they could not give anonymous accounts to the investigation. One former student says Rayner told them that the university did not want anonymous accounts, and so decided against giving their account of witnessing bullying behaviour. SAE Consulting principal Sallie Emmett says the firm does not comment on matters relating to clients.

The university declined to comment when asked about the investigation and its handling of previous complaints against Cooper. ■