

# News in focus



An observatory tower at Lund University in Sweden.

## ASTRONOMERS VICTIMIZED COLLEAGUES — AND PUT HISTORIC DEPARTMENT IN TURMOIL

Investigations at Lund University found the high-ranking pair guilty of bullying, but staff members say stronger action is needed to repair the damage.

By Alexandra Witze

**T**wo astronomers at one of Sweden's top research institutions, Lund University, have victimized, discriminated against or bullied colleagues, according to two independent investigations commissioned in 2020 by the university. The cases have thrown the institution's historic astronomy research division, the Lund Observatory, into uproar.

The complaints that launched the investigations allege that the pair — Sofia Feltzing and

Melvyn Davies — bullied colleagues using their positions of power, and that Lund University officials failed to act strongly enough following multiple reports over the years. Although bullying and harassment are rife in academia, this case is unusual because it pits many members of an academic division against two of its most senior professors, alleging long-lasting and widespread harm.

Feltzing is an observational astronomer who holds several influential roles across Europe, including chair of Sweden's National Committee for Astronomy. She denies some

of the allegations from the investigation findings against her but agrees with those concerning two instances of what she says could be regarded as victimization. Davies, a theoretical astrophysicist who studies planetary systems and star clusters, denies all the allegations in the findings against him.

Both say they are actively working towards improving the working environment at the observatory. They also note that in January, lawyers for the university declined to pursue legal disciplinary action against them, citing a lack of evidence. Feltzing has since filed

complaints against two of her managers; investigations into those complaints are ongoing.

Because of the case, Davies moved to Lund's mathematics department in January; Feltzing has been working from home, but is expected to be reintegrated into the observatory. The plan to bring Feltzing back has not gone down well with many there. Over the past year and a half, representatives of PhD and master's student groups have sent letters to Lund's dean of science and vice-chancellor, requesting that they take further action. Faculty members have also weighed in: "Insisting on a reintegration plan of a factual harasser without taking the safety and concerns of victims seriously puts astronomy [at Lund] at risk of collapse," reads a January 2021 protest letter signed by 11 senior staff members and addressed to Erik Renström, the university's vice-chancellor.

Renström says the university is taking steps towards fixing the situation, including bringing in another top administrator to supervise Feltzing's reintegration into the observatory. "In this case, we can observe that earlier, clearer and more robust measures would have been desirable and probably saved many people from a lot of suffering," he wrote in an e-mail to *Nature*. "At the same time, the department must now look ahead, and robust and long-term work environment management is currently in progress."

Lund University has a policy stating that it does not tolerate victimization or harassment. Yet "this was a problem of serial harassment", says Anders Johansen, an astronomer who was head of the department of astronomy and theoretical physics, of which Lund Observatory is a part, from 2016 to 2020. He is moving to the University of Copenhagen, in part because of the stress of the case. Johansen says he received and tried to act on multiple complaints when he was department head, but failed to make headway; he compiled an informal tally from his own experience, and from speaking to past observatory leaders, which added up to at least 36 complaints since 2008. Feltzing and Davies confirmed to *Nature* that they knew of several complaints, in addition to the ones that prompted last year's investigations, but they declined to comment on the whole list.

### Tumult at Lund

The investigations were triggered last September, when two staff members at the observatory filed separate complaints against both Feltzing and Davies. In the complaints, the astronomers describe situations ranging from Feltzing belittling students and other speakers during scientific talks, to Davies criticizing others' research and intentionally excluding colleagues from scientific opportunities.

Follow-up investigations concluded in November and December that Feltzing had committed 16 acts of victimization or

offensive discrimination, and that Davies had committed two acts of victimization. All are violations of Sweden's Work Environment Act. These are the first complaints against Feltzing and Davies to result in findings against them.

Last December, Feltzing herself filed formal complaints against observatory head David Hobbs and Leif Lönnblad, head of the department of astronomy and theoretical physics. The resulting investigation is examining actions they took regarding the complaints against Feltzing, and is ongoing. Hobbs and Lönnblad declined a request from *Nature* for comment.

A number of sources at the observatory told *Nature* they believe the university has allowed problems to fester, damaging scientific

---

**"You should be able to go to your workplace without being attacked by your co-worker."**

---

output and causing anxiety. "Science activities are hugely affected," says an astronomer who asked to remain anonymous for fear of reprisal. "We spend a lot of time denouncing and documenting the situation, and all our activities suffer from this." The observatory has interrupted its seminar series to avoid bringing external speakers into a tense situation. Some employees have taken extensive sick leave because of the stress.

Bullying and victimization can have far-reaching and long-lasting impacts in academia, says Christina Björklund, an economic psychologist at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm who studies workplace bullying. She emphasizes that she is speaking generally, and not specifically about the Lund Observatory case. "You should be able to go to your workplace without being attacked by your co-worker," she says. "Everybody should have a chance to be successful." She notes that rates of stress, depression and mental illness can be high not only in people who are bullied, but also among bystanders.

### Problems fester

Lund University is routinely ranked among Sweden's top research centres. Astronomy in the city of Lund goes back for nearly three and a half centuries; the first observatory there was built in 1672, by the grandfather of astronomer Anders Celsius – after whom the temperature scale is named.

Many of the people who previously reported harassment by Feltzing and Davies were students or postdocs who cycled out of the department while the professors remained. One was Guido Moyano Loyola, a former astronomy postdoc at Lund. In 2018, he alleged that Feltzing and Davies had bullied him and

some of the other students; Moyano ended up leaving astronomy altogether, returning to his home country of Argentina and working as a data scientist. "I was really heartbroken," he says. An investigation into Moyano's claim by the university's human-resources representatives culminated in supervised meetings with him and Feltzing and Davies; the pair say they thought the situation had been resolved through these meetings.

Anna Arnadottir, a graduate student of Feltzing's between 2004 and 2009, says that her working relationship with Feltzing was "quite unhealthy", to the point that Arnadottir asked the department's director of graduate studies to intervene. In the last year of Arnadottir's PhD, all of her meetings with Feltzing had to have a third person present in them, says Arnadottir, who today is a research engineer at the observatory. Feltzing says that she worked on changing her behaviour towards Arnadottir.

The controversy is spilling over into Swedish astronomy more broadly. Feltzing technically remains chair of Sweden's National Committee for Astronomy, but the vice-chair of the committee has been leading its work since January, after the committee learnt of the complaints against Feltzing. In June, the committee established a working group to review policies regarding its chairship.

### Alarm bells ignored

Problems at the observatory burst into broad view in May 2020, when a survey commissioned by the university to probe workplace climate found that "two senior professors ... are described to control the department through behaviour such as verbal aggressiveness, rude tone, control of employees, capriciousness and offensive behaviours". The survey included interviews with all 49 employees at the observatory. The final report does not name the two senior professors involved, but Feltzing, Davies and Johansen were the only senior professors at the observatory at the time. The report concludes that 70% of observatory employees said there had been harassment or bullying.

"The content of the report that was delivered at the end of May last year was alarming, and yet it didn't set alarm bells ringing," says Colin Carlile, a Lund Observatory master's student who is an experienced international research programme manager and was previously director-general of the European Spallation Source, a physics research facility under construction in Lund. "Swift and decisive action is always called for in such circumstances, but clearly it does not always happen."

Others say that the Lund Observatory experience is one that other institutions should not repeat. "If there is a zero-tolerance policy," says Johansen, "there has to be some form of consequences or accountability."