Workplace Gaslighting in The Higher Education Sector: A Systematic Literature Review

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Abstract: Gaslighting has increasingly been recognised as a corrosive form of psychological manipulation that profoundly undermines employees' mental health, confidence, and career trajectories. Within higher education, an environment already shaped by rigid hierarchies and uneven power structures, the effects of gaslighting can be particularly severe. This review systematically analyses the literature on gaslighting in higher education, tracing how it manifests, its psychological and professional consequences, and its intersections with sustainability discourses, including the emerging concept of "green gaslighting." A conceptual framework is developed to illustrate the ripple effects of gaslighting from the individual to the institutional level, situated within broader debates on organisational sustainability. The review also identifies key gaps in current scholarship, particularly in relation to long-term outcomes, enforcement of institutional reforms, and cross-cultural variations, offering pathways for future inquiry.

Keywords: Gaslighting, Literature, Higher Education, Sustainability

I INTRODUCTION:

The term gaslighting first entered public consciousness through mid-twentieth-century theatre and film, where it was used to describe deliberate psychological manipulation aimed at destabilising another's sense of reality. In recent times, term has been co-opted into academic and professional dialogue to describe the subtle but deeply damaging ways in which those in authority undermine the perceptions and lived experiences of others. At work, gaslighting often includes behaviours like minimising concerns, changing expectations without notice or denying experiences entirely to make people feel confused, incompetent or crazy. These practices thrive in environments characterized by entrenched hierarchies and power asymmetries. Higher education, with its complicated hierarchies of administrative power, academic prestige and structural inequities around gender, race and precarity is fertile ground for such behaviours.

Gaslighting in universities is not just a problem of isolated events, but a result of deeper definitions and institutions. At an individual level, victims suffer from anxiety and depression and experience stifled career progression. At the institutional level, these harms spread like waves, impairing collaboration, eroding collegial trust and undermining the very ethos of academic life.

Moreover, recent scholarship draws attention to an institutionalised form of manipulation— green gaslighting—where organisations exaggerate or misrepresent their commitment to sustainability, using symbolic actions to distract from unresolved structural issues [13]. In this sense, gaslighting operates not only as an interpersonal phenomenon but also as a mechanism through which institutions protect their image while perpetuating inequality.

The purpose of this review is to bring together these strands of scholarship into a coherent analysis. By systematically examining how gaslighting is conceptualised, experienced, and addressed in higher education, this review highlights its psychological toll, professional consequences, institutional implications, and links to sustainability.

II RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The review pursues three central objectives:

1. To systematically examine the forms, prevalence, and impacts of gaslighting in higher education,

particularly its consequences for mental health and career development.

2. To explore the intersection between gaslighting and institutional sustainability, including the emerging discourse on "green gaslighting."

3. To identify gaps in the literature, especially concerning long-term impacts, cross- cultural variations, and institutional accountability.

III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a systematic literature review (SLR) approach, ensuring that findings are drawn from a transparent and replicable process. Searches were conducted across JSTOR, Scopus, and Google Scholar, focusing on material published between 2010 and 2024, a period in which both workplace gaslighting and sustainability discourses gained significant limelight.

Articles were chosen based on three criteria: (a) direct engagement with gaslighting in workplace or higher education contexts; (b) consideration of mental health, sustainability, or organisational outcomes; and (c) publication in peer-reviewed journals or other academically credible formats. Opinion pieces, non-empirical essays, and sources unrelated to educational or institutional contexts were excluded.

From an initial pool of studies, 26 sources [1–26] were identified for inclusion. Data were analysed thematically, with findings organised into five clusters: (1) forms of gaslighting; (2) impacts on individuals and institutions; (3) gaslighting in higher education; (4) sustainability and green gaslighting; and (5) strategies for reform.

IV FINDINGS

Forms of Gaslighting: The literature reveals that gaslighting rarely appears as a single action; rather, it develops as a cumulative pattern of behaviours that progressively destabilise the target. One of the most common tactics is the deliberate withholding of information, which leaves employees feeling unprepared or incompetent [5]. Other strategies include trivialising concerns, which reframes legitimate frustrations as exaggerated or irrational [1]; shifting expectations or goalposts, which ensures that targets always feel inadequate [2]; and directly contradicting lived experiences, sowing chronic self-doubt [6].

These tactics gain particular force in hierarchical environments where power is concentrated and challenges to authority are discouraged. The insidiousness of gaslighting lies in its incremental nature: each incident may appear minor, but together they create a pervasive atmosphere of uncertainty and diminished self-worth.

Impacts on Mental Health and Career Progression: The cumulative effect of gaslighting is most clearly visible in its impact on mental health. Across the reviewed literature, victims consistently reported symptoms of anxiety, depression, stress, and social withdrawal [7]. The erosion of self-confidence often translates into decreased job satisfaction and can ultimately derail career progression, particularly for early-career academics [3].

Importantly, these harms are not confined to the direct target. Colleagues who witness or sense gaslighting dynamics often internalise fear, leading to a culture of silence and mistrust. In the academic context, where collaboration and peer exchange are crucial, such an environment undermines both productivity and innovation [8]. The impact is therefore both individual and collective, weakening the human and intellectual fabric of institutions.

Gaslighting in Higher Education: Universities embody structural conditions that make gaslighting both more likely and more damaging. Hierarchies between senior academics, administrators, and junior staff or students create significant power imbalances. Research shows that women and minority groups disproportionately experience gaslighting, reflecting and reinforcing systemic inequalities [4].

In many cases, gaslighting functions as an extension of academic bullying. Senior colleagues may dismiss the research contributions of junior staff, deny the validity of concerns about workload, or obscure opportunities for career advancement [9]. These practices do more than harm individuals: they narrow the diversity of academic voices, privileging those already secure within institutional hierarchies while marginalising others.

Sustainability and "Green Gaslighting": A striking development in the literature is the recognition of

parallels between interpersonal gaslighting and institutional behaviours. The concept of green gaslighting describes how organisations exaggerate sustainability initiatives or highlight symbolic actions while neglecting deeper structural issues [13]. For example, a university may publicise its recycling programme while outsourcing labour to contractors who face exploitative conditions.

This phenomenon raises serious ethical questions. Just as interpersonal gaslighting erodes personal trust, green gaslighting undermines institutional credibility. It suggests that manipulation in higher education operates not only between individuals but also through organisational narratives designed to maintain reputations while avoiding systemic change [14].

Strategies for Reform: The literature points to a range of strategies for mitigating gaslighting, though evidence of their effectiveness remains uneven. Training programmes that raise awareness of gaslighting behaviours are a common recommendation, as they help staff and students to recognise manipulation when it occurs [15]. Institutional policies are also critical; clear reporting pathways and protections for whistleblowers can provide safe mechanisms for accountability [16].

Beyond structural interventions, cultural strategies such as peer support networks can play a vital role, offering validation to those whose experiences are dismissed or denied [18]. Access to mental health services is equally important, particularly for individuals already harmed by gaslighting [19]. Finally, leadership accountability emerges as essential: when senior academics and administrators are held responsible for ethical conduct, they set the tone for institutional culture [20].

V. HELPFUL HINTS

V Discussion:
The findings of this review highlight that gaslighting in higher education cannot be reduced to interpersonal conflict; it is a systemic issue embedded in institutional cultures and power relations. By destabilising individuals, gaslighting undermines collegiality, erodes trust, and ultimately compromises institutional effectiveness.
The proposed conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates these dynamics. Gaslighting behaviours

generate psychological harm, which in turn affects career progression and institutional functioning. Lower morale, higher turnover, and diminished diversity of perspectives all contribute to institutional dysfunction. Proposed reforms aim to disrupt this cycle, while sustainability discourses underscore that psychological safety must be recognised as a dimension of social sustainability.

Fig. 1:

Conceptual Framework of Gaslighting in Higher Education and Sustainability
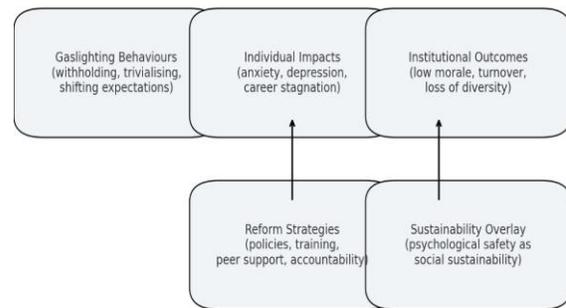
Source: Authors

One of the most striking insights is the persistent gap between recognition and action. Institutions may formally acknowledge bullying or commit to sustainability, but these commitments often remain symbolic. Anti-bullying policies, for example, may be implemented without effective enforcement [21]. Similarly, claims of sustainability ring hollow when accompanied by exploitative labour practices [22].
Another important gap lies in the limited geographical scope of current research. Much of the literature focuses on Western higher education, where individualistic norms and relatively flat hierarchies shape experiences of gaslighting. In more collectivist contexts, or in universities with even steeper hierarchies, the phenomenon may manifest differently. Comparative studies are therefore required to understand how cultural and institutional contexts mediate both the occurrence and impact of gaslighting.

VI Conclusion and Recommendations:

This review indicates that gaslighting in higher education is pervasive, multifaceted, and deeply damaging. It manifests in practices such as withholding information, trivialising concerns, shifting expectations, and dismissing experiences.

The psychological impacts include anxiety, depression, and career stagnation, while the institutional effects extend to diminished collaboration, loss of trust, and compromised sustainability.

Three recommendations emerge as particularly urgent. First, institutions must institutionalise recognition and response mechanisms, ensuring that training, policies, and reporting systems are consistently enforced rather than left optional. Second, sustainability must be reframed to encompass psychological safety, acknowledging that universities cannot credibly claim sustainability leadership while tolerating toxic interpersonal dynamics. Third, researchers should pursue longitudinal and cross-cultural studies, tracking the long-term consequences of gaslighting and examining how it manifests across diverse institutional and cultural settings.

Gaslighting is not merely an interpersonal issue; it is a systemic challenge that threatens both the ethical standing and the sustainable future of higher education. Addressing it requires more than policy statements—it demands cultural change, institutional accountability, and a willingness to confront uncomfortable truths about power and manipulation within academic life.

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