

Athena SWAN and Race Equality charters, through which UK universities are attempting to become more welcoming of diversity and gender equality.

In a little-reported development, the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education will next year relinquish its role as the designated independent quality body for universities in England, because, in its view, the approach taken by ministers is “not consistent with standard international practice for quality bodies”. As we have written before, it is unacceptable for governments to interfere with the workings of research and higher-education regulatory and compliance bodies. Truss’s government has nothing to fear from its researchers, and everything to gain from a constructive relationship with them. Science needs government both as a funder, and as an enlightened enabler of discovery, invention and innovation. Governments have always needed science and research methods in a spectrum of policy areas, and, increasingly, as a tool to devise, test and evaluate public policies.

There will always be, and there always have been, robust conversations between scientists, science advisers and policymakers. That’s healthy. But it is unhealthy for science and, more importantly, dangerous for society, when governments undermine people who hold expert knowledge, and when governments interfere with independent regulatory processes. A change at the top must lead to a reset in thinking and practice.

Zero tolerance for threats against scientists

Too often, researchers who share their expertise on contentious topics such as COVID-19 are subjected to abuse. Their institutions must step in to protect them.

No researcher should experience violence or threats while going about their work. But this is an ever-present danger for researchers in places such as Afghanistan that are controlled by totalitarian regimes. Increasingly, it is also a risk for researchers elsewhere who work in areas of science and public policy where views can be extremely polarized, such as in climate change or firearms control – or, indeed, in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A year ago, *Nature* polled researchers in several countries who had spoken to the media about COVID-19. We found that 47 out of 321 respondents (some 15%) had received death threats and 72 had been threatened with physical or sexual violence. The Science Media Centre in London published advice on how to get support. In an Editorial at



CARLOS BARRIA/REUTERS

Nature has published a toolkit to help protect scientists from online harassment.

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the time, we urged institutions to recognize the seriousness of these threats and to do more to protect colleagues (*Nature* 598, 236; 2021).

Now, *Nature*’s Careers team has talked to more experts and has published a toolkit for researchers on how they can protect themselves from abuse and threats (see *Nature* 609, 205–207; 2022).

The advice includes relatively simple technological fixes for individuals, including turning off commenting and direct messaging on social-media platforms such as Twitter, setting up two-factor authentication on all accounts and using a password manager to generate strong passwords to reduce the risk of accounts being hacked.

But our toolkit includes important advice for institutions, too. For example, they should remove researchers’ contact details from websites at the first sign of harassment, which can involve publicly available contact details being used to bombard people with threatening messages and phone calls. Universities can also provide expert help, including having dedicated staff on hand to give advice or screen messages. And they can connect people with colleagues who have themselves experienced harassment and can provide support.

Institutions must also actively defend staff and issue clear statements supporting colleagues. Researchers report finding such acts empowering, because it reassures them that bodies with power are looking out for them. “You feel like you have a safety net,” says Evita March, a psychologist at Federation University Australia in Melbourne.

Researchers know that their work is always open to question and challenge – that, after all, is how science progresses. But there’s no place for threats in science. That means that those who have the power to protect scientists must do more to exercise it.