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Sexual harassment allegations leveled at leading evolutionary biologist

Swiss biologist Laurent Keller, who is no longer employed by the University of Lausanne, denies all claims

7 MAR 2023 • 3:15 PM • BY CATHLEEN O'GRADY



Laurent Keller studied ant social behavior for decades at the University of Lausanne. RENE RUIS/KEYSTONE



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On 6 February, the University of Lausanne (UNIL) told staff by email that prominent evolutionary biologist Laurent Keller was no longer employed there. The Swiss university and Keller both declined to explain why, and there is still no official word on the reason. But *Science* has learned that in the past 2 months, at least three former researchers in Keller's department submitted accounts to the university of his alleged inappropriate behavior with women scientists and students. The university has arranged for outside lawyers who specialize in sexual harassment to collect the accounts.

The written accounts include allegations that Keller shouted at researchers and called them names while in his office, invaded junior women's personal space at department social events, made disparaging comments about women's scientific ability, and made sexual advances to women in his department while chair. One account says Keller made women students uncomfortable at department parties by standing and dancing too close to them and by touching them.

At least one additional former researcher corresponded with the university's human resources department in January, arranging to give a negative account of Keller's actions, according to emails seen by *Science*.

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The allegations are not the first against Keller. In 2018, the university passed a case of alleged sexual harassment by Keller to Groupe Impact, a regional government agency that handles claims of bullying and sexual harassment, according to an email sent by an agency employee.

Keller said to *Science* by email that he was "completely cleared" by Groupe Impact in the 2018 case, and that he denies all the allegations. He pointed to his "track record of successful female Ph.D. students and postdocs," and said he is unable to comment further because of "ongoing procedures." He added: "I also want to stress that I have a very good relationship with the students, technicians or other staff who were working with me until - February 6 and that there are no complaints by any of them."

Keller, 62, who studies the social behavior of ants, was president of the European Society for Evolutionary Biology from 2015 to 2017 and sits on the editorial boards of many journals. He chaired the Department of Ecology and Evolution (DEE) at UNIL for 20 years, until 2018, and brought in millions of

dollars in grants. He was also a member of a panel awarding research grants for the Swiss National Science Foundation, and in 2015, he received the Marcel Benoist Swiss Science Prize, known as the “Swiss Nobel Prize.”

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Several researchers who were at UNIL told *Science* that Keller’s reputation at parties was well-known and long-standing. Chelsea Chisholm, an ecosystem scientist in Canada who was a postdoc in the DEE from 2017 to 2019, says she received repeated warnings, including from a professor, to stay away from Keller at events such as the department Christmas party. As a result, Chisholm says she avoided work social events. This “prevented me from engaging with my colleagues, which was incredibly isolating,” she says. She adds that the department’s toxic work environment contributed to her decision to leave academia.

Valentijn Van den Brink, now a data analyst at the Netherlands Enterprise Agency who did his Ph.D. in Keller’s department, remembers intervening after observing Keller standing “way too close” to a junior scientist who was backed up against a table at a 2013 party in the DEE building. Van den Brink stepped in to talk to the woman and suggested to Keller that he leave to get a beer. Keller denies this allegation.

Others who have worked with Keller defend him. Valérie Vogel, now a special education teacher, who did a Ph.D. and postdoc in Keller’s lab from 2002 to 2009, says she never experienced or witnessed any bullying or sexually inappropriate behavior from Keller. She says he went out of his way to help people not just professionally, but also personally. Catherine Berney, now retired, who worked with Keller as a lab technician from 2006 to 2021, says she also never experienced or witnessed inappropriate behaviors. “The strict silence imposed by current University administrators of what misdemeanor Laurent is accused of spurs a lot of rumors and is contrary to a fair evaluation of the case,” Berney wrote in an email to *Science*.

Emails seen by *Science* indicate that in February, the university’s human resources officials informed those submitting accounts of Keller’s behavior that it would send the accounts to two outside lawyers: Camille Maulini and Clara Schneuwly, who specialize in sexual harassment and “the defense of women’s and feminist causes,” according to the website of their firm, Collectif de Défense. The firm declined to comment.

UNIL spokesperson Géraldine Falbriard declined to comment on why Keller is no longer employed. By law, Swiss employers “are not allowed to communicate the reasons of an end of a working relationship ... without the agreement of the employee,” she said. An employee who has been fired may challenge the decision in court, says Swiss labor lawyer David Raedler, who

has no knowledge of the Keller case, but spoke to *Science* about the legal context. Keller declined to comment on whether he was fired from the university and whether he plans to appeal.

A 2022 survey of students and staff at the university reported widespread sexual harassment, including 148 incidents that would be punishable under Swiss criminal law, among them four cases of rape. In June 2021, an external audit found the university and Groupe Impact had mishandled two cases of sexual harassment. The audit, conducted by University of Geneva legal scholar Karine Lempen, says that because of improper procedures, women who reported harassment had no access to information about the investigation, including its outcome. In contrast, it notes, alleged harassers were “able to consult the file, including the non-anonymized interview minutes ... and the investigation report was sent to them in its entirety.”

The university announced in November 2021 it would overhaul its sexual harassment procedures, and that its rector, Frédéric Herman, who took office in August 2021, considers sexual harassment very serious.

Falbriard says the changes will include compulsory staff training, better communication about university procedures, and making more and better trained confidantes available for targets or witnesses. A regular public report will anonymously list the number of complainants and sanctions taken against offenders. She says the new procedures and resources will be communicated to the university body in a launch campaign at the end of March.

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