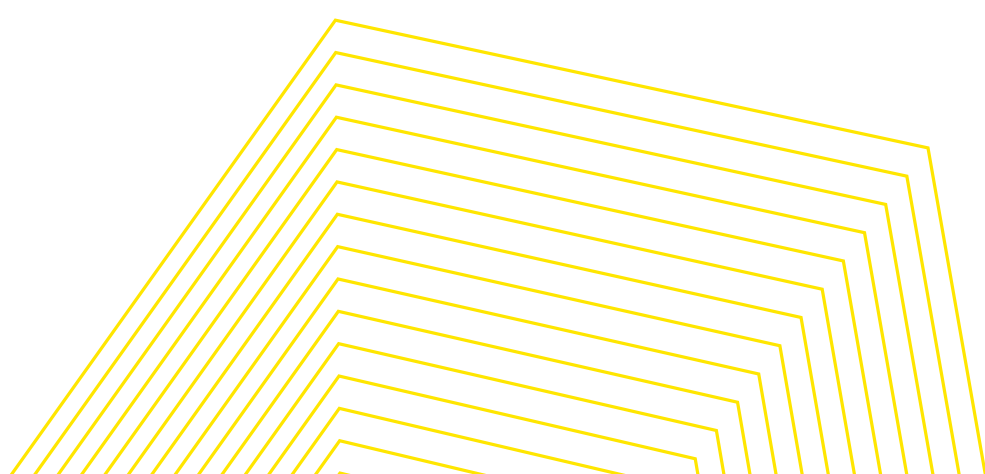




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Pilot Study

Understanding University Responses to HDR Candidate-Supervisor Relationship Challenges

July 2021



Co-sponsored by



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This pilot research study was instigated in 2018 by the then Pro Vice-Chancellor Research Training at UNSW¹ and the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Graduate and International Research) at The University of Melbourne to examine the scope and extent of candidate workplace relationship issues and institutional responses from the perspective of university staff responders.

While there has been long-standing informal awareness of a range of issues between postgraduate research candidates and their supervisors, there is limited systematic research on the incidence and impact of these issues. Research and surveys undertaken in recent years in Australia around unacceptable behaviour in university environments have largely focused on undergraduate students, overlooking the experiences of the Higher Degree Research (HDR) / graduate researcher² cohort, particularly in the context of candidate-supervisor relationships.

This pilot research study sought to address this gap. Drawing on the perspective of university employees with responsibility for graduate research management, this research explored whether anecdotal awareness of issues in supervision relationships were substantiated, and surveyed staff views on effective and ineffective responses.

The research comprised 47 anonymous interviews conducted in 2020 with professional and academic staff responsible for graduate research management across all Faculties at UNSW Sydney and Canberra and The University of Melbourne, in addition to representatives from central university services. The focus on university employees with responsibility for graduate research management – rather than the candidates themselves – was intentional. The number of first responders in the two universities is reasonably small and therefore it was relatively straightforward to access a representative cohort. Such staff also tend to have longitudinal experience of both candidates and supervisors and the workplace relationships that frequently arise between them.

While this qualitative research did not purport to measure incidence, it confirmed anecdotal accounts and widespread awareness of a range of candidate workplace relationship issues including mismatched expectations, communication problems, bullying, challenges arising from supervisor and candidate performance, conflicts of interest, inappropriate relationships and attachments and sexual harassment and sexual assault. The research highlighted an emerging concern among staff around the mental health of graduate research

candidates and the perceived impact this had on candidates' relationships with their supervisors.

Underpinning these issues, university staff responsible for graduate research management consistently observed the inherent power imbalances between candidates and supervisors, and for candidates within the university hierarchy, with interviewees reporting that many candidates were reluctant to either contact their supervisors directly to discuss their candidature or to pursue more formal reporting mechanisms.

In considering the management of these issues within the two subject Universities, the research confirmed a focus on 'in-house' informal responses at more junior staff levels within Schools and Faculties, with escalation of issues to more senior staff or central university agencies only where necessary. While staff expressed a strong preference for informal mediation between the parties, the research identified a suite of other measures utilised by staff in their efforts to manage candidate-supervisor relationship issues, including pre-emptive expectations checklists and agreements, adjustments to supervisor arrangements, transfer or withdrawal of candidates and the occasional resignation, transfer or retirement of supervisors. The emphasis on informal responses was reflected in staff approaches to documentation and recording of issues, which were reportedly heavily reliant on emails to one or both parties, rather than via more formal mechanisms.

While there were some variations in emphasis between staff in different Schools and Faculties, the staff members' general concerns, descriptions of patterns in supervisory and candidate behaviour, and reflections on the management of these issues were common across all disciplines. This consistency in the themes identified by staff suggests that these same issues may be replicated at other Australian universities and warrants further investigation.

In collating and analysing the observations of professional and academic staff responsible for graduate research management at UNSW and the University of Melbourne, this pilot research study both confirmed anecdotal accounts around a range of candidate-supervisor relationships and highlighted patterns in the management of conflict between candidates and supervisors. While the focus on university staff was intentional in the design of this pilot research study, this approach has necessarily limited the findings to the subjective perspectives of these staff; exploring the views and experiences of higher degree researchers / graduate researchers themselves would add rich data to that collected in this pilot study.

¹ The position of Pro Vice-Chancellor Research Training at UNSW was discontinued at the end of 2018 and the new Dean of Graduate Research UNSW assumed the role of advisor on this project from the beginning of 2019.

² UNSW refers to "Higher Degree Researchers" (HDRs) while The University of Melbourne refers to "graduate researchers". For convenience the term "candidates" has been utilised in this paper to refer to both contexts.

Ethics approval and funding

The project was jointly funded by UNSW and The University of Melbourne and undertaken at UNSW Sydney, UNSW Canberra and The University of Melbourne.

The pilot research study was granted ethical approval at UNSW in April 2019.³

Project team

The study was carried out by the following researchers:

Chief Investigators

Professor Louise Chappell

Scientia Professor, Faculty of Law & Justice, UNSW Sydney

Professor Andrea Durbach

Emeritus Professor, Faculty of Law & Justice, UNSW Sydney

Associate Professor Kate MacNeill

Associate Dean, Education and Students, Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne⁴

Researcher

Allison Henry

Australian Human Rights Institute, UNSW Sydney

The research team regularly liaised with Dean of Graduate Research UNSW and the Pro Vice-Chancellor Graduate and International Research at the University of Melbourne, sponsors of the research, to seek their guidance and to determine appropriate responses.

Review of literature

The project team undertook a review of research and surveys undertaken in Australia in recent years around unacceptable behaviour in university environments including:

- > The Australian Human Rights Commission's 2011 *Report on the Review into the Treatment of Women at the Australian Defence Force Academy: Phase 1 of the Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force* (Phase 1 Report).⁵
- > The National Union of Students (NUS) Women's Department's 2011 *Talk About It Survey: Results and Recommendations*⁶ and February 2016 *Talk About It survey*.⁷
- > The Australian Human Rights Commission's 2016 national student survey which sought to understand Australian university students' experiences of sexual assault and harassment, including in university settings, and the subsequent 2017 *Change The Course: National Report on Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment at Australian Universities* report which detailed the survey findings and made recommendations in response.⁸
- > The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Inc (CAPA) submission to the Commission, which highlighted the particular vulnerability of higher degree by research candidates "given the inherent imbalance of power between student and supervisor."⁹
- > Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT) annual student surveys including the Student Experience Survey,¹⁰ which gauges student views on areas including teacher quality, student support and learning resources but only considers the experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students, not those of postgraduate research students;¹¹ and the Postgraduate Research Experience Questionnaire, which asks general questions about supervisor support and feedback.¹²
- > The NSW Ombudsman's 2017 Discussion Paper, *Complaints about the supervision of postgraduate students* which had been prompted by a steady number of complaints over many years relating to postgraduate supervision in NSW universities.¹³

5 Australian Human Rights Commission, *Report on the Review into the Treatment of Women at the Australian Defence Force Academy: Phase 1 of the Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force* (Phase 1 Report), 3 November 2011, defencereview.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/ADFA_2011.pdf?_ga=2.63186600.688904054.1559429618-1499404198.1539903266

6 National Union of Students Women's Department (Sloane C. assisted by Fitzpatrick K.), *Talk About It Survey: Results and Recommendations*, 2011.

7 National Union of Students Women's Department, *Talk About It 2015 survey*, February 2016, accessed at d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/nus/pages/144/attachments/original/1454369041/Talk_about_it_Survey_Report.pdf?1454369041

8 The Australian Human Rights Commission's 2016 national student survey into sexual assault and sexual harassment included postgraduate respondents but did not distinguish between coursework and research postgraduates and the Commission's subsequent *Change the Course* report paid little specific attention to the experiences of postgraduates: Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Change the Course: National report on sexual assault and sexual harassment at Australian universities*, 1 August 2017, humanrights.gov.au/our-work/sex-discrimination/publications/change-course-national-report-sexual-assault-and-sexual

9 Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Inc (CAPA), *CAPA Recommendations Sexual Assault and Sexual Harassment Survey Universities Australia – Australian Human Rights Commission*, July 2017, capa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/CAPA-Recommendations-SASH-survey.pdf

10 Funded by the Australian Government's Department of Education Skills and Employment and undertaken by the Social Research Centre on behalf of QILT.

11 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), *2020 Student Experience Survey*, March 2021, qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/ses/ses-2020/2020-ses-national-report.pdf?sfvrsn=a3ffed3c_2

12 Quality Indicators for Learning and Teaching (QILT), *Graduate Outcomes Survey*, November 2020, p. 30, qilt.edu.au/docs/default-source/gos-reports/2020-gos/2020-gos-national-report.pdf

13 NSW Ombudsman, *Complaints about the supervision of postgraduate students*, Discussion Paper, October 2017, pp.3, 10-11, ombo.nsw.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/49684/Complaints-about-the-supervision-of-postgraduate-students-Discussion-paper-October-17.pdf

3 UNSW, HC180931.

4 Associate Professor MacNeill replaced Professor Julie McLeod (Pro Vice Chancellor, Research Capability – University of Melbourne) on the project in November 2019.

The project team also reviewed relevant national policy guidance and regulatory documentation around behavioural expectations of postgraduate research candidates and their supervisors including:

- > *The Higher Education Standards Framework*¹⁴ – administered by the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) – which outline requirements for the provision of research training as well as standards relating to student wellbeing and safety, and associated TEQSA guidance.¹⁵
- > *The Graduate Research Good Practice Principles*,¹⁶ published by the Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR), which contains high level statements about governance, policy and procedural standards including around supervision of graduate researchers, and associated good practice and policy guidance.¹⁷
- > The complementary report to *Change The Course*, the Australian Human Rights Institute's *On Safe Ground: Strengthening Australian university responses to sexual assault and harassment: A good practice guide for Australian universities*,¹⁸ which drew on the Commission's findings and analysis and comparative international research to develop "a framework for use by Australian

universities to design and enhance policies and procedures for the response to and prevention of sexual assault and harassment."¹⁹

- > *The Principles for Respectful Supervisory Relationships*²⁰ released by Universities Australia (UA), the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), CAPA and the ACGR in August 2018. The Principles, premised on the assertion that "a sexual or romantic relationship between a supervisor and their student is never appropriate"²¹ provided high level guidance to universities, which UA, the NTEU, CAPA and the ACGR suggested could be incorporated by Australian universities into their institutional codes of conduct and policies or governance documents relating to research supervision.²²

Finally, the project team considered the context in which this research was being undertaken, reviewing the structures and documentation underpinning higher degree research governance and the management of candidate-supervisor relationships at UNSW²³ and the University of Melbourne.²⁴ While UNSW has a central Graduate Research Services unit, the University of Melbourne follows a decentralised model in supporting their candidates and supervisors.

14 See Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), *Higher Education Standards Framework*, teqsa.gov.au/higher-education-standards-framework-2015

15 Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), *Guidance Note: Research and Research Training*, version 1.3, 5 July 2018, p.4, teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/guidance-note-research-and-research-training-v1-3-0-web.pdf?v=1581303634

16 Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR), *Graduate Research Good Practice Principles*, undated, acgr.edu.au/good-practice/graduate-research-good-practice-principles/

17 Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR), *ACGR Good Practice Framework for Research Training*, August 2018, acgr.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Good-Practice-Framework-for-Research-Training.pdf; Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR), *ACGR Guidelines for Quality Graduate Research Supervision*, version 1, June 2018, acgr.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ACGR-Guidelines-for-Quality-Graduate-Research-Supervision.pdf; Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR), *ACGR Conflict of Interest in Examination Guidelines*, updated September 2015, acgr.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/ACGR-Conflict-of-Interest-in-Examination-Guidelines.pdf

18 Durbach, A. and Keith, K., *On Safe Ground: A Good Practice Guide for Australian Universities*, Australian Human Rights Centre, UNSW, 3 August 2017, humanrights.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/inline-files/AHR0002_On_Safe_Ground_Good_Practice_Guide_online.pdf

19 *ibid*, p.11.

20 Universities Australia (UA), National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and Australian Council of Graduate Research (ACGR), *Principles for Respectful Supervisory Relationships*, August 2018, universitiesaustralia.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Postgraduate-Principles.pdf

21 *ibid*, p.3.

22 *ibid*, p.2.

23 See UNSW, *Graduate Research*, research.unsw.edu.au/graduate-research; UNSW, *Graduate Research Governance*, research.unsw.edu.au/graduate-research-governance; UNSW, *Research Training Policy Framework*, research.unsw.edu.au/research-training-policy-framework; UNSW, *Higher Degree Research Supervision Policy*, version 5.0, 2 October 2020, gs.unsw.edu.au/policy/documents/hdrs supervisionpolicy.pdf; UNSW, *Higher Degree Research Supervision Guidelines*, version 2.0, 18 September 2018, gs.unsw.edu.au/policy/documents/hdrs supervisionguide.pdf; UNSW, *Research Progress Review and Confirmation of Research Candidatures Procedure*, version 2.1, 13 December 2018, gs.unsw.edu.au/policy/documents/progressreviewandconfirmationofresearchcandidaturesprocedure.pdf

24 See The University of Melbourne, *Graduate Research Hub*, gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au; The University of Melbourne, *Research Gateway*, gateway.research.unimelb.edu.au; The University of Melbourne, *Graduate Research Hub: Committees, Groups and Networks*, gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/staff/committees-groups-and-networks; The University of Melbourne, *Graduate Research Training Policy* (MPF1321), version 20, 15 January 2021, policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1321; The University of Melbourne, *Supervisor Eligibility and Registration Policy* (MPF1322), version 2, 26 March 2020, policy.unimelb.edu.au/MPF1322

Interviews

University staff with responsibility for higher degree research candidates as part of their position description were identified in consultation with graduate research services at the two participating universities. The staff interviewed were drawn from all levels across all Faculties at both universities and included representatives of central agencies responsible for candidates. Interviewees included Deans, Heads of School, designated academics within Schools with responsibility for candidates (eg Associate Dean (Research Training) (ADRT)) and professional staff in Schools or Faculties who administer higher degree research programs including postgraduate coordinators and administrators. Staff from central agencies including counselling, workplace safety and wellbeing services and graduate research services were also interviewed.

Between 10 March and 15 May 2020 the project researcher undertook 47 structured interviews with a range of staff from UNSW and the University of Melbourne including:

- > 22 staff at the University of Melbourne
- > 21 staff at UNSW Sydney
- > 4 staff at UNSW Canberra

Due to COVID-19 restrictions all but one interview was undertaken either via Microsoft Teams, Zoom or telephone. All interviews were electronically recorded for the purposes of transcription.

An Emerging Findings paper detailing key themes identified in the interviews was finalised on 15 May 2020.

Transcription and analysis of interviews

The interviews were transcribed between May and August 2020 by an external professional transcriber. The data from the interviews was analysed between September to December 2020 utilising a coding schedule to identify emerging themes around the nature of candidate-supervisor relationships and scenarios of effective and ineffective responses from the perspective of university employees with responsibility for graduate research management.

Discussion Paper

A Discussion Paper was drafted from January to April 2021. The Discussion Paper draws heavily on direct quotations from interviewees to make the data accessible and illustrative of the issues raised and the approaches taken by staff in managing candidate-supervisor relationships. This Paper is an edited version of that Discussion Paper.

The research for this project collected anonymised reports on the occurrence and impact of candidate workplace relationship issues in the Australian university context. The research team particularly focused on identifying the type of issues that can prompt candidates to informally convey their concerns to staff or make a formal complaint, and on documenting institutional responses and strategies that have proven effective in individual cases. During their interviews staff raised issues in a consistent manner which supported the clear thematic analysis below.

Power imbalances and the reluctance to report

"I reckon a lot of... what gets reported is the tip of the iceberg. A lot of things just never get reported."²⁵

"... in a lot of cases, things get buried... because in most cases the student doesn't raise the issue with us or they do raise it with us and they don't want to take it anywhere."²⁶

"... the candidate, you know, really does feel like the supervisor is their boss. They have to obey."²⁷

"I'm always surprised in some ways of students putting up with things for too long. That says something about how supervisors either are very assured in their, in their power over students or something like that."²⁸

"... they were really afraid of the ramifications and a lot of it came down to being punished by their primary supervisor where, 'They're gonna take away the equipment', or 'They're gonna take away my scholarship.' Or 'They're gonna stop talking to me and I still need their help.'"²⁹

Many of the professional and academic staff responsible for graduate research management interviewed for this project recognised the inherent power imbalance between candidates and supervisors. Reflecting these concerns, staff reported that many candidates preferred to raise and discuss issues but not formally report them.

Interviewees reported that many candidates expressed concerns about long term ramifications in raising or reporting issues, not only in terms of their candidature but also in relation to future research and career prospects. These concerns were particularly acute in smaller schools or in fields where there was concentrated academic expertise.

²⁵ Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

²⁶ Interview #38 of 5 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

²⁷ Interview #42 of 15 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

²⁸ Interview #44 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

²⁹ Interview #14 of 22 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

"... in a lot of cases, things get buried... because in most cases the student doesn't raise the issue with us or they do raise it with us and they don't want to take it anywhere."

Issues raised

Interviewees identified a broad spectrum of issues arising, and affecting the relationship between, candidates and their supervisors including:

Mismatched expectations between supervisors and HDR candidates

Staff interviewed for this project consistently framed issues around mismatched expectations between candidates and supervisors – “a lot of expectation versus reality-type issues”³⁰ – which were accompanied by, or manifested into, significant communication problems.

"...there's always a tension between the candidates who think that the supervisor should tell them everything they have to do and the supervisor who thinks that the candidate should be running their own show."³¹

Mismatched expectations, as characterised by interviewees, can be divided into several themes:

- > A mismatch of expectations as to the preparedness³² and capability of the candidate to work with requisite autonomy. On other occasions, staff reported that “the supervisor thought the student was really great for some reason or wanted to give the student an opportunity and then ... they realise that that's not what it looks like... there's a complete mismatch of expectations.”³³
- > The candidate's misunderstanding of the nature of a PhD – staff reported that “many of them come in, wanting to change the world or write a book”³⁴ or “they seem to think that a PhD is some sort of long assignment”³⁵ or the candidate not appreciating that “a PhD involves writing multiple drafts” with ongoing feedback from supervisors.³⁶
- > A mismatch in expectations founded in the research project itself: a supervisor very focused on the work they want the candidate to undertake, or a candidate enrolling with a specific idea but dissuaded from pursuing it: “... their project isn't quite what they expected... it's not as interesting as they, they had hoped or they'd been kind of guided towards a different project because that's more of interest to the supervisor...”³⁷

- > Tensions arising from a supervisor's focus on publications versus completing the candidate's desire to complete their thesis.
- > Candidates having unrealistic expectations of their supervisors around practical considerations, such as the frequency of meetings, the nature of feedback provided, response time on draft papers, and the time and assistance that supervisors would generally offer their candidates.
- > Candidates not appreciating supervisors' research, teaching and other commitments.
- > Supervisors not fully appreciating the financial implications of candidate's circumstances, particularly certain types of scholarship: “So a scholarship running out by the end of the, of the candidature, not only means that the candidate does no longer have a stipend to live on but then, if we're talking about an international candidate, that has implications in terms of visas...”³⁸

Staff interviewed for this project were careful to note that in a proportion of cases, supervisors were less conscientious than required and “... there's definitely supervisors that have no interest in their students ... it's neglect because they just don't care.”³⁹

³⁰ Interview #29 of 15 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

³¹ Interview #6 of 12 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

³² Interview #46 of 4 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

³³ Interview #37 of 8 April 2020, via Zoom.

³⁴ Interview #8 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

³⁵ Interview #19 of 17 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

³⁶ Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

³⁷ Interview #38 of 5 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

³⁸ Interview #10 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

³⁹ Interview #34 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.



Communication problems

Interviewees raised different communication styles, personality clashes and personality mismatches as a key challenge, with one staff member noting that communication challenges permeated all of the other issues between candidates and supervisors: "There's generational aspects there about expectations and how to communicate. There's gender issues. There's international, cultural issues. All of those play a really big role in that as well."⁴⁰

"A lot of [students come to me] not understanding something that their supervisor was asking and they thought they wanted something different from what their supervisor was asking of them. Whether that was a graduation end date or an outcome of a review, or publishing a paper... Sometimes they'd ask and I think they completely misinterpreted what the supervisor said. And sometimes I think the supervisor misinterpreted what the student was asking as well. And sometimes they just really, truly wanted different things."⁴¹

"... people perhaps don't grasp [the situation and] have those awkward conversations... don't reply to their emails and cancel appointments, and ... the relationship just goes sour in an early stage and it becomes very adversarial rather than a, a co-operative one..."⁴²

Staff noted that providing constructive feedback was a challenge for all supervisors,⁴³ and the tone in which feedback was provided to candidates was sometimes poor.

Emails were identified as "a disastrous way to communicate" between supervisors and candidates "because you don't get tone of voice ... you don't get facial expression" and "people take that as being offensive and directive."⁴⁴

Staff noted that communication problems extended in both directions:

"... the conflict's not necessarily always from academics. We have students who actually have very, are very difficult and demanding, and, and, in some cases, yeah, have actually given our, our academics very, you know, a lot of stress."⁴⁵

Bullying

Staff interviewed for this project acknowledged that communication problems can escalate into interpersonal conflict, as well as behaviours and language that could be perceived as bullying. On these occasions, bullying behaviours and language were evident in both personal interaction and online.

"I think you can get some supervisors that are really neglectful but not necessarily bullies. And some others that aren't necessarily neglectful but are bullies."⁴⁶

"... more the miscommunication and thinking they're being told they have to do something 'cause that's what the supervisor wants as opposed to, you know, that's what policy says, or, 'I'm just trying to give you the, you know, the best outcome,' or whatever, as opposed to truly bullying them. That said, there are probably a couple of supervisors that were pretty close to toeing the line on, on bullying."⁴⁷

"... we've had a few cases of, of students flying off the handle and behaving inappropriately."⁴⁸

Staff stated that in their experience bullying could occur "upwards and downwards"⁴⁹, from supervisors towards candidates and candidates towards supervisors.

"I think there's often poor behaviour on both sides that, in the bullying cases... In my experience, it's actually, it's been at least 50/50..."⁵⁰

Supervisor performance

Staff interviewed for this project commented on supervisor performance – including supervisors being over-committed in terms of their general workload, and / or having too many candidates to supervise – adversely impacting on their capacity to effectively and consistently manage all of their candidates.

"So the biggest issue probably is people not getting enough feedback... and not getting enough written feedback about their work... we do have some academics who tend to only give verbal feedback or who tend to prioritise their own research. So they might not be willing to be intent on the candidates as others would be. And they're ... the ones that usually then their progress lags and then they get new supervisors, and then it becomes pretty apparent what they've been missing and trying to deal with that can be quite challenging."⁵¹

When questioned, interviewees reflected that a supervisor's own PhD experience often impacted on the way they approached supervising candidates, with one interviewee observing: "a supervisor tends to supervise just the way that they were supervised ... If they've had a very hands-on supervisor, they'll tend to be hands-on. If they've had a very hands-off supervisor, they will tend to be hands-off."⁵² Another staff member expressed frustration as "bad habits are ingrained into the system. And it's just replicated again and again, and again."⁵³

Interviewees reported that a small proportion of supervisors were neglectful of their candidates; treated or communicated with them poorly; placed pressures on the nature and subject of their research; misused their candidate's time in their own work (eg lecture preparation); or utilised their candidate's time excessively in their own research projects or for tutoring. In addition, staff commented on supervisors who were "very upfront"⁵⁴, "put extremely high expectations"⁵⁵ their candidates, were "slave drivers"⁵⁶, wanted "their students to work 24/7"⁵⁷ – frequently leaving candidates feeling intimidated.⁵⁸

Some interviewees expressed their frustration around supervisors wanting to protect their candidates

and exhibiting reluctance to actively manage their progression, one stating that "Some supervisors will continue to hope that their student will all of a sudden, miraculously be independent and, and learn in the way they would like, and some students just never get there."⁵⁹

Staff expressed frustrations around the difficulty in being able to effectively address or discipline this poor supervisor performance:

"... if you are there for a while, you realise that there are some supervisors who seem to have the same problem with more than one student. And those are the times we actually stop and think, and say, 'What are we gonna do with this?'... during the three and a half or four years we end up doing a lot of real conflict management simply because there [are] no repercussions to bad supervision... there are times when we don't know what to do about it."⁶⁰

Interviewees identified a number of general characteristics among these 'untouchable' supervisors: high achieving senior academics⁶¹, prolific researchers⁶², often successful in bringing in grants⁶³ or themselves on grant committees, well known and well connected.

40 Interview #47 of 14 May 2020, via Zoom.

41 Interview #14 of 22 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

42 Interview #4 of 31 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

43 Interview #33 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

44 Interview #6 of 12 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

45 Interview #40 of 30 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

46 Interview #38 of 5 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

47 Interview #14 of 22 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

48 Interview #25 of 16 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

49 Interview #11 of 15 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

50 Interview #46 of 4 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

51 Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

52 Interview #36 of 25 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

53 Interview #44 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

54 Interview #22 of 30 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

55 Interview #34 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

56 Interview #34 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #8 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

57 Interview #34 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

58 Interview #22 of 30 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

59 Interview #43 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

60 Interview #37 of 8 April 2020, via Zoom.

61 Interview #9 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

62 Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

63 Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

“...there’s a person that’s giving someone paid work and actually wanting them to do the paid work over and above their thesis, even though they’re gonna gain from both. But, and the other, the other conflict of interest is supervisors keeping students as students for longer than they should...”

Candidate performance

Interviewees indicated that candidate performance issues – particularly around satisfactory progress within required timeframes⁶⁴ – arose within the context of the supervisor-candidate relationships, with one staff member stating that “active management of poor performance is probably what I spend more time doing than anything else.”⁶⁵

Interviewees reflected on the ways that supervisors may impact on the candidate’s progress.

*“I think there’s a bit of a correlation between candidates who are unhappy with their supervision and slow achievements, candidates who have complained about authorship-type issues and not completing on time. I can’t help but think that there’s a cause and effect relationship there too.”*⁶⁶

Conflicts of interest

Staff identified a myriad of issues that they broadly characterised as “conflicts of interest” in the supervisor-candidate relationship.

*“conflict of interest would be number one [issue I see] ... conflict of interest varied from ... financial conflict of interest right through to sort of more academic conflict of interest. So what I mean by that is, you know, the academic wanting to further their career off the back of the hard work of the [candidate] without due regard to their, what they wanted; that sort of, that sort of conflict.”*⁶⁷

These issues included the composition of supervisory teams and panels and challenges in identifying appropriately independent examiners. Staff reported concerns about the

close collaboration between colleagues adversely impacting on candidates’ views of the independence of their support structures, leading to candidates feeling uncomfortable in raising issues. Interviewees related instances of co-supervisors being close friends or colleagues and supervisors’ post docs or more junior staff members being appointed to Advisory Committees and review panels.⁶⁸ Staff reported that potential conflict situations were particularly difficult to manage in small Schools and research centres where “the number of people who ... meet the requirements for being a panel chair or panel member is a very small pool”⁶⁹ and identifying “suitable examiners for very niche areas is very difficult.”⁷⁰

Interviewees spoke of conflicts and tensions arising where there was an employment relationship in addition to supervisory relationship, and how “things can kind of get confusing and muddled at times”⁷¹ – sometimes adversely impacted on the candidates’ studies and progression.

*“...there’s a person that’s giving someone paid work and actually wanting them to do the paid work over and above their thesis, even though they’re gonna gain from both. But, and the other, the other conflict of interest is supervisors keeping students as students for longer than they should...”*⁷²

In the employment context, interviewees suggested that some supervisors took advantage of their candidates, “abusing their availability and their time”⁷³ in unpaid teaching assistant roles, and particularly highlighting that candidates “are cheaper than research assistants.”⁷⁴

Tensions around publishing papers – including co-authorship, placement of names on research publications and attribution for research – were also frequently raised, with one interviewee identified publications as “probably one of the main drivers of tensions between supervisors, students, post-docs, other senior staff members within the, the organisation.”⁷⁵ Another stated that authorship was the most common conflict they experienced, noting that the problems will usually occur “when there hasn’t been, when there are different expectations and those haven’t been communicated.”⁷⁶

Staff noted that project funding, sponsorships and scholarship arrangements often complicated these issues and some interviewees also raised examples where the relationship between a supervisor and candidate was impacted by the establishment of start-up companies⁷⁷ or the registering of patents.⁷⁸

Inappropriate relationships and attachments

Staff reported that they were aware of instances of inappropriate relationships between candidates and their supervisors, and also instances where infatuation or romantic relationships had formed.

*“We’ve had some instances of infatuation I think from a student to a supervisor, which then resulted in her sending lots and lots of emails to the supervisor.”*⁷⁹

*“There’s certainly instances of supervisors behaving badly and there are certainly instances where perhaps the professional boundaries have been crossed one way or another. Whether that’s a personal relationship or ... intimacy is the wrong word but a closeness that has not been helpful and that it’s caused things to get tangled up.”*⁸⁰

*“[We] had a couple of scandals in our faculty involving sexual relationships that went the whole course; they were never declared ... Candidate went all the way through and it’s only afterwards when things went wrong elsewhere did it blow up and everyone said, ‘But they’re sleeping with each other and this is going on’...”*⁸¹

In some instances the relationship was disclosed and proactively managed with a change in supervision⁸² though one staff member suggested “When it did happen, the supervisor recused themselves of everything [but] it wasn’t squeaky clean let’s say...”⁸³

Interviewees noted that these situations often involved “repeat offenders”.

*“In our school we have had situations where a particular supervisor has had relationships with students, and I think that’s a conflict of interest ... the supervisor has been much older than the young girls involved.”*⁸⁴

64 Interview #43 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #47 of 14 May 2020, via Zoom.

65 Interview #11 of 15 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

66 Interview #8 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

67 Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

68 Interview #27 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #32 of 7 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #10 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

69 Interview #9 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

70 Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

71 Interview #21 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

72 Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

73 Interview #6 of 12 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

74 Interview #38 of 5 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

75 Interview #34 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

76 Interview #35 of 30 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

77 Interview #36 of 25 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

78 Interview #45 of 27 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

79 Interview #43 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

80 Interview #44 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

81 Interview #8 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

82 Interview #33 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

83 Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

84 Interview #13 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

Sexual harassment and sexual assault

While the vast majority of staff interviewed for this project reported they were not aware of any allegations or proven incidents of sexual harassment or sexual assault between supervisors and candidates, many of the interviewees were careful to qualify their comments by saying a version of ‘as far as I am aware.’ One interviewee explained that such reports ‘that would go to different areas of the university.’⁸⁵ In this respect it should be noted that an overwhelming majority of postgraduate respondents to the Australian Human Rights Commission’s national student survey at UNSW and The University of Melbourne indicated they had little or no knowledge of university policy on sexual harassment and assault; of where to seek support or assistance; and of where to go within their university to make a complaint.⁸⁶

Staff suggested that there was under-reporting of sexual harassment and sexual assault in the supervisor-candidate context.⁸⁷ A staff member from a central university service supporting candidates observed that “I think for postgraduate students the under-reporting is greater than undergraduate students... they know what they’re dealing with. They understand that the stakes are higher if they make a complaint because ... it’s a bit of a make or break time for them.”⁸⁸

The same staff member noted that there is “an understanding” amongst postgraduate candidates that the academic involved “does that stuff within faculty” and that “the experience that they’ve dealt with [is] that the person has been known to be someone who engages in these kind of behaviours. And, and it’s kind of just, you know, that’s just him.”⁸⁹ Another interviewee referred to the challenge of holding supervisors to account when candidates were often reluctant to report: “it’s very frustrating because I think there are repeat offenders. I think there are certain people that are, you know, are problems. And we, we need to be able to call them out.”⁹⁰

Interviewees were confident that they were sufficiently aware of their university’s policies and procedures around sexual harassment or sexual assault and where to seek assistance.

While staff members referred to the inclusion of information about sexual assault and harassment – and the different facilities available to candidates on campus, including counselling – in induction and other training programs, they also expressed concern that candidates may not know where to go for assistance.

“No, I don’t think that is as clear as it should be, you know ... that’s something we can probably think about that, you know, what do we have in place and how, how can people feel safe to go and have those conversations, and so on.”⁹¹

Mental health concerns

Unprompted, staff interviewed for this project raised concerns about the mental health of many candidates and how it impacted on candidate-supervisor relationships, with one observing that it was “an emerging, big issue.”⁹² Another staff member commented that there were both pre-existing issues and that “Within the stress of a PhD or graduate research, you know, an unmasking of mental health...”⁹³

“I do think mental health and mental wellbeing of the graduate researcher cohort is, is a problem ... mental wellbeing within general ... cohort isn’t that great...”⁹⁴

Candidates’ mental health and wellbeing issues sometimes manifested in how candidates were managing their relationship with their supervisor and other university staff, with one interviewee stating it was “a major issue in those relationship breakdowns.”⁹⁵

“... you see things that someone just builds something up so much in their own mind and then you sort of get four emails sent to you between 10.00pm and 2.00am ... so that comes to us and we know that the supervisors are getting the same thing.”⁹⁶

“This whole concept of ... anxiety and depression, and ... mental-health issues that have been so dominant in many of the cases that we have dealt with.”⁹⁷

Management of issues

Timing of issues arising

While staff reported that tensions sometimes arose early in a candidate’s journey, such as at the confirmation stage, other staff observed that issues between candidates and supervisors were more often revealed towards the end of the candidature, when a thesis submission deadline was looming.⁹⁸ Staff also suggested that issues sometimes came to light through the annual Research Progress Review (UNSW) / Academic Progress Review (University of Melbourne) processes where candidates had an opportunity to confidentially raise issues with their panel members.

“It often has a lot to do with [when] the student wants to speak up, and, and usually it’s gonna be later in their candidature rather than earlier because, you know, earlier is hard, you know ... between a rock and a hard place.”⁹⁹

How issues are raised

Staff identified a range of pathways for how issues between candidates and supervisors came to their individual attention, highly dependent on their own level of seniority. However their responses reflected a consistent pattern in reporting pathways: most issues were raised by candidates with professional staff – postgraduate coordinators and administrators – in the first instance and then escalated as necessary to more senior staff within the School or Faculty – such as ADRTs or equivalent, Heads of School, Deputy Deans and Deans – and then potentially to central university agencies.

Many postgraduate coordinators and administrators interviewed for this project reported their own ‘open door’ policy and noted that candidates usually dropped by for an in-person discussion, though sometimes the initial approach was by email. A smaller proportion of issues were reportedly raised by supervisors with professional staff. In addition, staff reported that issues infrequently came to their attention via a third party, either other candidates or staff, and very occasionally from a central university agency such as counselling services. Recognising safety in numbers, staff reported that a group of candidates occasionally raised an issue with professional staff together.

Academic staff responsible for higher degree research candidates reported that candidates and supervisors occasionally raised issues with them in person or via email. One academic reported that “Staff members will email me. It tends to be the students who don’t email.”¹⁰⁰ Another recalled a “couple of instances where supervisees have made an appointment with me because they have a problem.”¹⁰¹ A third more senior staff member reflected that “Sometimes it happens that the people involved ... don’t trust dealing with it at the school level so they jump that, jump that level and they directly come to me...”¹⁰²

However, staff in these more senior roles reported that it was far more common for issues to be escalated to them by postgraduate coordinators and administrators and / or ADRTs (or equivalent). This pattern continued through to Heads of School and Deputy Deans or Deans.

“... because we have layers of help built into the system now it would be quite severe if it’s coming to me because often things are dealt with... I’m usually considered the last resort. And so I imagine a lot of things are dealt with in those mechanisms and they seem to be dealt with pretty well... So I don’t get a lot of issues coming to me. By the time they come to me, they’re probably, they’ve built up into something quite severe.”¹⁰³

“So the candidate could reach out to the postgraduate co-ordinator who works at a school level and that person could then feed it back to me at the faculty level ... there are three steps, basically. The first one is to find a local resolution. If that cannot be achieved, then we move to the faculty level. If I can facilitate a resolution at that level, that’s fine. If not, then it goes to the central services.”¹⁰⁴

85 Interview #27 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

86 Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Profile of University Respondents – University: The University of NSW*, unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/documents/University%20of%20NSW%20Summary%20Tables%20V2.pdf; Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC), *Profile of University Respondents – University: The University of Melbourne*, provost.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/3106444/AHRC-Unimelb-Summary-Tables.pdf

87 Interview #3 of 17 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams

88 Interview #28 of 14 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

89 Interview #28 of 14 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

90 Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

91 Interview #37 of 8 April 2020, via Zoom.

92 Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #3 of 17 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

93 Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

94 Interview #45 of 27 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

95 Interview #25 of 16 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

96 Interview #27 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

97 Interview #37 of 8 April 2020, via Zoom.

98 Interview #17 of 16 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #16 of 16 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #1 of 10 March 2020, in person.

99 Interview #38 of 5 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

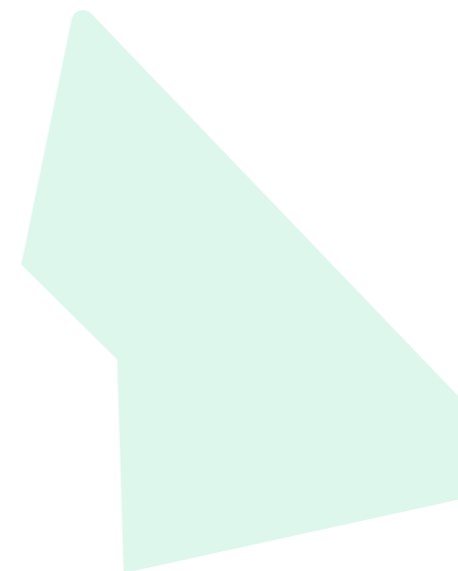
100 Interview #45 of 27 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

101 Interview #42 of 15 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

102 Interview #17 of 16 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

103 Interview #47 of 14 May 2020, via Zoom.

104 Interview #10 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.



How issues are managed

As noted above, staff reported a general reluctance by candidates and supervisors to report formally, usually preferring informal discussions to address their issues. Interviewees reported that candidates were at times reluctant for staff to even raise the issues with their supervisors, instead seeking to simply inform staff of their concerns and seek information as to their options.

Across Schools and disciplines at both Universities interviewees reported a strong preference and focus on 'in-house' informal responses at more junior staff levels within Schools and Faculties, by postgraduate coordinators and administrators. Aside from candidate performance issues¹⁰⁵ staff indicated that candidate-supervisor relationship issues coming to their attention were overwhelmingly handled via discussions with one or both parties, with minimal reference to university reporting mechanisms external to the School or Faculty.

"We try to keep everything sort of informal and in-house. And in half the time."¹⁰⁶

"... if it can be managed in that way, [informally], it's often a better outcome for people. Formal processes are there for very, very good reasons but they do heighten stress about this quite considerably. And it's not just the, the person who's made the complaint who's under stress; it's the other people who are involved."¹⁰⁷

"Hopefully, very, very few things are going into the formal process. The formal process, with all due respect to the people that do the formal process, is horrible for everybody."¹⁰⁸

Interviewees reported that local action by the School or Faculty was "much quicker and much more appropriate"¹⁰⁹ and that "The outcomes are generally better."¹¹⁰ Issues were escalated to more senior staff only if the seriousness of the issue warranted it; if the dispute was proving intractable; or when there was a need to appeal to the 'higher authority' of the

more senior staff as either candidates or supervisors were not satisfied with management of their issues by professional staff, or where senior staff needed to speak with their academic colleagues.

"We do handle them in-house ... So it's only quite serious things escalate. And they're few and far between."¹¹¹

"Very few go to the [central agencies] unless we need to do some candidature management."¹¹²

Staff reported that postgraduate coordinators and administrators, while managing issues locally and informally, would frequently seek advice or a sounding board from more senior staff. Interviewees from some Faculties reported utilising Higher Degree Committees, where relevant staff from the different Schools came together each month to discuss "any problematic cases from our schools, cases where candidature might have exceeded the four years or any other problem cases."¹¹³

The emphasis on informal responses was reflected in staff approaches to documentation and recording of issues, which were reportedly heavily reliant on emails to one or both parties, rather than via more formal mechanisms. Staff referred to using "emails as a document trail, essentially"¹¹⁴, to "retain records of everything that was kind of done and sort of follow-ups, and everything like that."¹¹⁵ Some staff reported that PGCs or administration staff collated the emails as "the central repository,"¹¹⁶ serving as a mechanism for tracking candidate issues and follow-up.¹¹⁷

Other staff referred to compiling minutes,¹¹⁸ or occasionally making a file note,¹¹⁹ after meeting with candidates and supervisors, to document the content of the discussion. Other staff highlighted the progress review process as the main mechanism utilised for recording issues.¹²⁰

Staff recognised the need for information to be recorded so that issues could be collectively managed, and to ensure it was available when issues later escalated or staff transitioned.

"... we make sure those notes are available. And we share it among ourselves, meaning both the research co-ordinators. So we have a common place where we have a list of students we think have had problems or still the problems exist and we have to follow through with that."¹²¹

While staff consistently reported a strong preference for informal mediation between candidates and supervisors this research also identified a suite of other measures utilised by staff in their efforts to manage candidate-supervisor relationship issues, including adjustments to supervisor arrangements, transfer or withdrawal of candidates and the occasional resignation, transfer or retirement of supervisors.

While staff expressed the view that changing a candidate's supervisor was "the worst case"¹²² and "a bit of a last resort"¹²³ others suggested that changing supervisors was a mechanism commonly utilised to manage irreconcilable differences between candidates and supervisors, with one staff member referring to this scenario as "rescue supervision".¹²⁴ Staff also described circumstances where supervisory teams were managed quite closely to address problematic supervisors or supervisory arrangements were rearranged to promote the involvement of the secondary supervisor.

Staff reported that candidate withdrawals were infrequent – one staff member suggested around 5% of cases where issues had arisen between candidates and supervisors ended in withdrawal¹²⁵ – but did occur.

Staff spoke of scenarios where supervisors, whose performance or behaviour in relation to their candidates had come under question, had been moved on – either resigning, transferring, not having their contracts renewed, or retiring. In most of these cases staff reported that the supervisor had effectively avoided scrutiny, causing frustration to remaining staff looking after candidates, and concern that these academics were likely perpetrating their poor patterns at their new institutions.

"On the staff-management matters ... I've seen too many of these cases not go anywhere ... even the cases that I'd seen where people have been removed because of their bad behaviour with students, typically, they leave before the investigation is finished. So I know several academic staff members who are at other universities, who I would not have anywhere near a student, ever. And there's nothing you can do about it."¹²⁶

"... we've got some colleagues who have now left the university where you, where you would say it was neglect."¹²⁷

While staff expressed confidence that the majority of issues between candidates and supervisors were resolved once raised, a number noted that the notion of satisfactory resolution was very subjective.

"I think mostly they solve it once and for all. If, if the candidate has to come back, then I don't consider it solved."¹²⁸

"I think most of it's sorted out, but you know that some fester in the background. Even though they'll never blow up, they'll never become a complaint, you occasionally chat to someone five years after they graduated and they're still a bit bitter about something."¹²⁹

"I'd say a good 99 per cent are resolved one way or the other [but] the ones that aren't they continue to drain resources and come back to bite you."¹³⁰

It is important to emphasise in this context that this project focused on interviews with professional and academic staff for whom managing conflict related to postgraduate researchers is a key responsibility, and candidates themselves were not interviewed for this pilot research.

105 Staff reported that candidate performance-related issues were managed in a structured and formal way, primarily through annual Research Progress Review / Academic Progress Review processes.

106 Interview #29 of 15 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

107 Interview #44 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

108 Interview #34 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

109 Interview #38 of 5 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

110 Interview #27 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

111 Interview #8 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

112 Interview #6 of 12 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

113 Interview #13 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

114 Interview #11 of 15 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #17 of 16 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #29 of 15 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #33 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #7 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

115 Interview #21 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

116 Interview #6 of 12 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

117 Interview #21 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #18 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

118 Interview #10 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

119 Interview #40 of 30 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #18 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

120 Interview #20 of 17 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

121 Interview #37 of 8 April 2020, via Zoom.

122 Interview #37 of 8 April 2020, via Zoom; Interview #34 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

123 Interview #6 of 12 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

124 Interview #1 of 10 March 2020, in person.

125 Interview #17 of 16 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

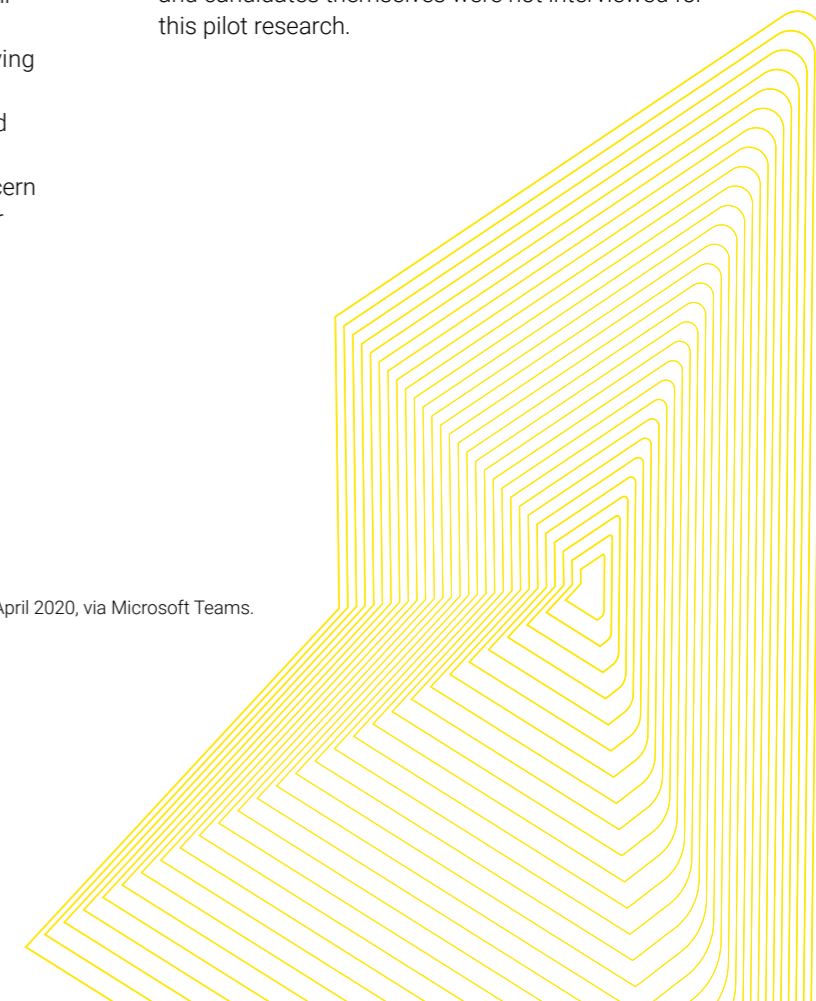
126 Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

127 Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

128 Interview #17 of 16 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

129 Interview #8 of 21 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

130 Interview #40 of 30 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.



Effective strategies to manage candidate-supervisor relationships and support candidates

While staff highlighted university-wide graduate research orientations and Faculty- or School-based introductory sessions for candidates – where information about expectations, policies and reporting mechanisms were shared – many conceded that candidates were often overloaded with information at these early stages and did not recall this guidance further into their candidature.

Efforts to pre-emptively address expectations

Staff reported that this challenge had led many Schools and Faculties to adopt additional mechanisms to help manage candidate-supervisor relationships once candidates commenced. Interviewees referred to their attempts to address mismatched expectations through a number of pre-emptive mechanisms including commencement checklists and the distribution of 'expectations sheets' to candidates at their induction program, and to supervisors during their training.

*"... we tell the students to make sure the very first meeting [with their supervisors] is the meeting where you go through [the sheet] and one by one answer all of these 15 or 20 questions that exist ... Like, 'Whose responsibility is it to decide on the topic? When should you be able to call each other?' kind of discussions. So that is the first thing that we are doing, and we are also advising for the student and supervisor teams to review that document [regularly]."*¹³¹

*"We have a little sheet when they start about, you know, this comes up. Whose responsibility is it to fix it? And it's a sliding scale of, you know, you or the supervisor. You know, it's really interesting to see where people put their expectations. So, yeah, we try and talk about these things but, yeah, we, we could do more work on that."*¹³²

However several staff recognised that even with the expectations questionnaire provided, "there's no sort of definite way in tracking students or supervisors whether they have completed this process or not"¹³³, "very often they don't do it"¹³⁴ and "... that we really need to push a bit more. And particularly at the school level we need to be doing that to say, 'Look, this is really important.'"¹³⁵

'Pre-confirmation' process

Concerned about situations where candidates were "getting to confirmation and they were sort of lost",¹³⁶ another staff member described the introduction of a 'pre-confirmation' process, between three and six months of a student's candidature, where the school utilises a checklist to flag any emerging issues. The staff member highlighted that "some red-flag issues ... arise there. And some of them are the student doesn't know what they're doing. You know, doesn't even have a title of a, of a thesis or even an idea of a thesis."¹³⁷

Enhanced communication channels

Staff positively referred to the establishment of additional and complementary channels of communication with their candidates, such as an independent advisory committee, established within six weeks of the candidate's enrolment; the creation of a new position of candidate liaison within their School, with a post-doc appointed to the outreach and liaison role; regular town hall meetings; a weekly post-grad club with different talks each week; and a Candidate Higher Degree Committee to access informal feedback from candidates.

Candidate surveys

Some Schools and Faculties had introduced surveys for existing candidates to gauge issues anonymously. While The University of Melbourne conducts a Research Experience Survey¹³⁸ every two years and Graduate Research Services at UNSW offers an exit survey and interview to all candidates withdrawing from their degree,¹³⁹ one staff member endorsed the introduction of anonymised exit surveys, as postgraduate candidates completed their studies, so that the quality of supervision contact could be better assessed.

Dedicated candidate spaces and involvement in School / Faculty

Staff from several schools who reported minimal issues with their candidates linked this with their higher degree candidates having dedicated space within the school and their candidates being encouraged to attend and participate in regular research seminars, for example with visiting academics.¹⁴⁰ One staff member said this approach helped make candidates "feel like they're part of the community as well."¹⁴¹ Another said that "We are a successful school and I think that's because we... treat the graduate students with respect."¹⁴²

¹³¹ Interview #20 of 17 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹³² Interview #47 of 14 May 2020, via Zoom.

¹³³ Interview #33 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹³⁴ Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹³⁵ Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

¹³⁶ Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹³⁷ Interview #30 of 15 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹³⁸ See The University of Melbourne, *Research Experience Survey*, gradresearch.unimelb.edu.au/surveys/melbourne-research-experience-survey

¹³⁹ Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁴⁰ Interview #5 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #6 of 12 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁴¹ Interview #19 of 17 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁴² Interview #35 of 30 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

Areas for greater attention

Interviewees identified a number of areas as warranting greater attention in more effectively managing relationships between candidates and supervisors, recognising that any approach to address the supervisory challenges raised in this study needs to be multi-faceted, encompassing an integrated approach to development of good supervisory practice, the management of issues plus a range of avenues to provide a safety net for candidates.

Higher degree application and screening processes

"... the fundamental issue is selecting the right student."¹⁴³

"It is a completely bizarre human relationship. Like I often, I, you know, talk about married at first sight. I mean it is just so strange. You shackle yourself to somebody for a couple of years based on a very sketchily-put-together application and very little knowledge about who they are... often people find themselves working with people and it's just not gonna work. And, and yet it's so critical. Like I mean how do you do a PhD without a good supervisor?"¹⁴⁴

Staff noted that the candidate-supervisor relationship was a significant one, lasting at least 3-4 years, but that recruitment, screening and selection of candidates was often less than robust. Staff referred to the mismatch of expectations between candidates and supervisors often occurring because of an initial lack of due diligence by both candidates and supervisors.¹⁴⁵ A number of staff referred to the unsatisfactory practice of a candidate approaching a potential supervisor with particular expertise and the academic accepting the candidate via an email with little interaction.¹⁴⁶ Other staff referred to supervisors who "didn't interview properly... before they arrived",¹⁴⁷ noting that this challenge was particularly acute in relation to international candidates.

"... there's no way at the moment to capture that in terms of individual records of supervisors ... when you go to apply a university, you just look at someone whose research interests match your own. But you have no idea if they're someone that [you would] want to work with ..."

While some staff encouraged prospective candidates to "Talk to the other HDRs and find out what your supervisor's like before you go"¹⁴⁸ others acknowledged that it was difficult for candidates to access information about prospective supervisors:

"... there's no way at the moment to capture that in terms of individual records of supervisors ... when you go to apply a university, you just look at someone whose research interests match your own. But you have no idea if they're someone that [you would] want to work with ..."¹⁴⁹

Staff responsible for managing higher degree candidates expressed their frustration that supervisors had on occasion been blind to potential problems, or had taken on too many candidates, ignoring staff advice.

"... there's a real culture of wanting a lot of postgrads and the best prestige or something associated with that. But then there's been a culture in the past of taking on so many that you're not giving them the support they need and also that maybe they shouldn't have come here in the first place. Maybe they weren't suitable. But that wasn't weeded out because there's such strong desire to have them, whereas I'm trying to inculcate a different culture, which is, 'Be very selective'.¹⁵⁰

Enhanced training and support for supervisors

Staff referred to a need for greater guidance for supervisors in terms of university expectations, and increased training for supervisors beyond policies and procedures.

"The role of the supervisor is, is quite poorly understood and the level of training we give it is not very adequate."¹⁵¹

Interviewees noted the need for training for supervisors specifically around the power dynamics of candidate-supervisor relationships and its impact:

"I think a lot of supervisors can really underestimate just how much power and influence they have over a candidate's wellbeing ... I would really like to see ... a lot more training given to supervisors but a lot more ongoing support as well in terms of how to do this more effectively."¹⁵²

Staff also highlighted the need for more complex supervisor training around:

- > Impact of supervisors on candidate wellbeing – "the human element"¹⁵³
- > People management training¹⁵⁴ including effectively managing teams¹⁵⁵
- > Communication styles including how to communicate more effectively with candidates,¹⁵⁶ providing constructive feedback appropriate to each candidate¹⁵⁷ and having difficult conversations with candidates.¹⁵⁸
- > Unconscious supervisor styles¹⁵⁹

The need to link training to real life scenarios was highlighted and a preference for face to face rather than online training was expressed by several staff.¹⁶⁰ The need for regular refresher training, particularly to update developments in university policies and procedures, was also highlighted by a number of staff.¹⁶¹

However interviewees emphasised the reluctance of many supervisors to undertake additional training.

"... when you get a senior professor, trying to make them come along and learn how to be a supervisor is... a tough sell."¹⁶²

"... most people in my team say, 'Well, we don't have the time to do more training'..."¹⁶³

"... whenever we have supervisor sessions, it's the supervisors who are excellent who are the ones who turn up. And it's the ones who you're like, 'Actually, this is the messaging you need to hear,' are the ones that don't bother turning up. And it's the same as those that resist going to the ... supervision training are the ones where you're like, 'Well, actually ... you need to go.' So it is kind of a bit preaching to the converted..."¹⁶⁴

Staff were sympathetic towards these supervisors, given their other commitments, but recognised "it's so crucial that they understand how to deal with this."¹⁶⁵

Increased supervisor accountability

Staff highlighted the need for mechanisms to hold supervisors more accountable for their performance and noted that, in an environment where academic performance is measured on multiple levels, supervisory performance appears to be largely overlooked.

"... some more accountability is important as well because, if people aren't willing to go to the training, then at least there's gotta be some mechanism for giving them feedback about their supervision."¹⁶⁶

"... there's no way at the moment to capture that in terms of individual records of supervisors ... given how we are marked for teaching and we have surveys, and we have survey results, and we have to answer to that ... it's odd that everything else is rated and captured ... It would be almost better if there was some sense of everyone's record was on our website of, you know, 'I've supervised x many candidates. Six, six have passed,' you know, whatever. I don't know. It's odd that we're so assessed on other things but not that."¹⁶⁷

¹⁴³ Interview #33 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁴⁴ Interview #5 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁴⁵ Interview #1 of 10 March 2020, in person.

¹⁴⁶ Interview #32 of 7 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁴⁷ Interview #45 of 27 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁴⁸ Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁴⁹ Interview #47 of 14 May 2020, via Zoom.

¹⁵⁰ Interview #47 of 14 May 2020, via Zoom.

¹⁵¹ Interview #36 of 25 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁵² Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

¹⁵³ Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

¹⁵⁴ Interview #27 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁵⁵ Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁵⁶ Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

¹⁵⁷ Interview #9 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams; Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

¹⁵⁸ Interview #27 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁵⁹ Interview #9 of 1 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁶⁰ Interview #37 of 8 April 2020, via Zoom; Interview #47 of 14 May 2020, via Zoom.

¹⁶¹ Interview #6 of 12 May 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁶² Interview #1 of 10 March 2020, in person

¹⁶³ Interview #36 of 25 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁶⁴ Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

¹⁶⁵ Interview #14 of 22 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁶⁶ Interview #24 of 17 April 2020, via telephone.

¹⁶⁷ Interview #47 of 14 May 2020, via Zoom.

Community of Practice

Staff referred positively to the utility of communities of practice amongst supervisors and/or staff managing candidates. One referred favourably to “twice-annual, supervisor forums, bringing in teams so that there’s sort of ‘a peer eyeballing’”.¹⁶⁸ Another noted a network of higher-degree committees within a Faculty, with every school represented, where “you basically end up with ... a monthly meeting where you can discuss the difficult cases.”¹⁶⁹ Another staff member would appreciate this sort of support, stating “I don’t have any formal kind of [opportunity] where I can actually, you know, talk about this in a meaningful way and, and criticise my practice, if that makes sense, you know. And get some feedback.”¹⁷⁰

Good Practice Guide

Staff expressed frustration that “there’s very little guidance from the University as a whole in how to deal with this”¹⁷¹ and “in terms of the information support and provision, perhaps it’s not as complete or it’s not centralised...”¹⁷² One staff member suggested that a good practice guide or other central documentation of difficult cases and appropriate responses would be helpful:

“I wonder sometimes whether or not having a central place and so there is a record of the cases that come through could be useful not just for identifying pockets of issues but just so there’s also a, a record of, ‘Okay, this is how this case was managed in the past,’ and being able to get something similar for the next time this happens. So, at the moment, that relies a lot on peoples’ own memories of, ‘Oh okay, we had this case and this is how we dealt with it,’ which I guess is why sometimes they come to us as well because we’ve seen more cases or heard of more cases than necessarily particularly some of the smaller faculties might have seen.”¹⁷³

Independent Ambassador or Ombudsman

Recognising the inherent power dynamics between candidates and supervisors, in addition to perceived or actual conflicts within Schools and Faculties, interviewees suggested the introduction of an independent position to assist candidates with early intervention in their cases.

“... if there was an ombudsperson, someone like one of the other HDRs or academics ... who were disturbed by the situation you could go and talk to, that could be

escalated outside of the, the train of power ... It’d also be good, so, you know, in the situation when HDRs are conflicted by, you know, their supervisors making them publish papers when they’d rather finish a thesis and go and ... they don’t feel that they can come and talk to [staff because of perceived conflict] ... There’s always allegiances ... trying to work with different people to get grants and things. But if there was one person that they could safely go to and there would be no ramifications ... An independent pathway ... I think that might be really the only way you can provide some sort of safety.”¹⁷⁴

“... having some sort of early warning or, you know, way to talk to somebody formally like, like an ambassador, a student ambassador who’s trained and even paid to, to be in that situation, to be able to take, you know, confidential things and to be able to sort of say, you know, ‘Okay, that’s, that’s something that really, you know, you need to call on now and try to sort it out now rather than wait until it’s, it’s, you know, completely collapsed.”¹⁷⁵

Alternative dispute resolution

One interviewee suggested the introduction of an independent mediator¹⁷⁶ while another recommended alternative dispute resolution as a mechanism for early intervention in difficult cases: “... counselling or, or just round-circle conferencing or, or call it whatever you want but some way that you can just say, ‘Okay, it’s time out on this. Let’s just pause for a bit and recalibrate.”¹⁷⁷

“... some more accountability is important as well because, if people aren’t willing to go to the training, then at least there’s gotta be some mechanism for giving them feedback about their supervision.”

Conclusion

This pilot research study utilised anonymous interviews conducted in 2020 with professional and academic staff responsible for graduate research management across all Faculties at UNSW and The University of Melbourne, in addition to representatives from central university services, to explore from their perspective, the full range of relationship issues between postgraduate research candidates and their supervisors.

The study confirmed anecdotal accounts and widespread awareness of a broad range of relationship issues commonly observed by university staff responsible for graduate research management including mismatched expectations between candidates and their supervisors, communication problems, bullying, supervisor and candidate performance, conflicts of interest, inappropriate relationships and attachments and sexual harassment and sexual assault. Interviews for this study also highlighted an emerging concern among staff around the mental health of graduate research candidates.

The study also painted a picture of how these candidate-supervisor relationship issues are commonly managed within the two subject

Universities, with a strong preference and focus on ‘in-house’ informal responses at more junior staff levels within Schools and Faculties, and escalation of issues to more senior staff or central university agencies only where necessary. This emphasis on informal responses was reflected in a strong staff preference for using emails to document and record issues, rather than utilising more formal mechanisms.

This research identified a number of measures employed by staff when candidate-supervisor relationship issues arose, including adjustments to supervisor arrangements, transfer or withdrawal of candidates and the occasional resignation, transfer or retirement of supervisors.

Finally, staff interviewed for the project identified a range of other strategies to manage candidate-supervisor relationships, and approaches to support candidates, which they believed warranted greater attention, such as more robust application processes, an Independent Ambassador or Ombudsman, enhanced training and support for supervisors including Communities of Practice and Good Practice Guides, as well as mechanisms to increase supervisor accountability.

¹⁶⁸ Interview #43 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁶⁹ Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁷⁰ Interview #40 of 30 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁷¹ Interview #36 of 25 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁷² Interview #33 of 9 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁷³ Interview #27 of 27 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁷⁴ Interview #13 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁷⁵ Interview #2 of 8 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁷⁶ Interview #3 of 17 April 2020, via Microsoft Teams.

¹⁷⁷ Interview #4 of 31 March 2020, via Microsoft Teams.



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