

**Complaints about the Supervision of
Post-Graduate Students**
A Discussion Paper
January 2016

Introduction

In recent months this office has been looking into complaints that arise from post-graduate supervision.

We were prompted to do so by a number of complaints about supervision. The complaints were so complex very considerable resources had to be devoted to dealing with them. Our experience has been that these sorts of complaints have a personal aspect that can make them exceptionally difficult to deal with. We have surveyed all NSW universities, and engaged in follow-up interviews with relevant university staff at each institution. We also spoke with representatives from several postgraduate student representative organisations. We have also reviewed applicable university policies.

Overall the universities of NSW have reported to us complaints by post-graduate students are not more frequent than any other kind of complaint. Allegations of academic or non-academic misconduct are also not found to be sustained any more often with such matters as compared with other grievances. However, virtually all universities recognised that there was a potential for such matters to be peculiarly complex and bitterly-contested and that significant resources had to be expended in dealing with matters of this kind.

The project we have been engaged on has been one which is intended to be helpful to all participants in opening up a conversation where universities could share what they felt to be best practice and for this office to make suggestions about how at least some difficulties in dealing with these matters can be addressed. We have not sought to rank how well different universities deal with complaints about postgraduate supervision. Nor do we suggest they have been dealt with poorly, over all, in the past.

We have received positive feedback from a number of universities about the benefits they took from participating in the conversations that have led to this discussion paper. For instance, one university found it had a good deal of useful information about conflicts between a supervisor and a student on a FAQ page on its website, but while the information had been designed to be freely available to all parties it only appeared in the “for supervisors” version of the FAQ page.

Universities have also moved of their own accord to address issues in response to the questions we put to the universities in our survey and in our follow-up interviews with interested parties. When a review prompted by the project found some policies were not as clear as they could be, these universities undertook to revise the policies.

We would welcome any further comments or submissions that universities wish to make on this discussion paper up to 19 February 2016. We will doubtless be discussing some of these issues at the annual Ombudsman University Complaint Handlers Forum which will be held on this date. We are likely to place a revised version of this discussion paper on our website after that date.

Why do universities find Post –Graduate complaints problematic?

Even in the best of situations, post-graduate study is stressful.

When disputes arise, the parties to them tend to be more argumentative and verbally skilful than average. Complainants who have successfully completed a graduate degree have demonstrated their capacity to critically analyse information, and to look at matters from different critical perspectives.

There is also usually a great deal at stake in complaints of this nature. A student who makes a complaint about their supervisor may feel the future of their academic career rests upon the result. Often, they will be right. The supervisor, in turn, will be looking at a serious impact on their reputation if a complaint about them is sustained.

Our interviews indicated university staff who deal with complaints arising out of these kinds of matters recognise the impact of these matters is substantial. This is not only the case in terms of the university resources that must go into investigating them. Beyond this is also a high human cost for the individuals involved. Many of the people involved in disputes permanently sour their prospects of engaging in further research. The emotional cost of such matters can ripple out, too, beyond just the parties involved in these disputes, as partners, family and friends are all affected by the stress such matters cause. Equally, the stress of being the subject of allegations has the capacity to end or compromise academic careers, and to affect family and personal relations even when complaints are not found to be sustained.

Difficulties in investigating complaints about bullying and harassment

The relationship between students and their supervisors is an unusual one. It is not designed to be a relationship between equals. To be a good supervisor it is necessary to provide support to a student, but it is just as necessary to provide needed criticism. If it is true, as has been said, that “an ideal supervisor is positive, honest, caring, patient and brutal,” some of those adjectives describe qualities that can and will draw complaints from some of the very students who are meant to benefit from them.

Complaints about the conduct of supervisors commonly contain allegations about bullying.

No university has the practice of requiring the parties involved in a supervision arrangement to keep detailed records of their interactions. Some supervisors require their students to email them details of agreements as to meetings or completion of milestones within research projects. Fewer supervisors themselves take the responsibility to make a record of such undertakings. If notes are kept at all of most of the meetings that take place, they are brief and fragmentary. All this is unproblematic in the vast majority of cases. When a serious dispute arises, however, the paucity of records can become frustrating for an aggrieved party. If a dispute arises, it almost always centres on events that occurred when two individuals were alone in a room having a conversation that does not exist outside their respective memories, which rarely align. A third party, investigating a complaint, has nothing they can definitively rely upon to determine where the truth lies.

Some similarities and differences between universities

At present, and for many years leading up to now, the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales have had a significantly higher number of higher degree research (HDR) students than any other NSW universities.

However, the numbers of HDR students at most of the remaining eight NSW universities are at historically high levels and all indications are that numbers of HDR students will continue to grow in future years.

This discussion paper comes at a time when a change of significance is shortly to occur at the University of Sydney. In 2016 many aspects of the administration of HDR will fall for the first time under the governance of the Administration Centre rather than being handled by the faculties. This change will bring the University into line with other NSW universities which have operated using this model of a co-ordinating office to oversee HDR matters for some years.

Although there are rare cases where some students may have a single supervisor when studying at HDR level, it is now overwhelmingly the case that students deal with a supervisory panel, one of whom will be the principal supervisor.

The majority of universities maintain a register of supervisors.

All universities now offer training in supervision to academics who wish to be placed on the register of supervisors or who see themselves as potential supervisors at universities without a register. At the majority of universities such training is mandatory for new supervisors; but this can still differ, from faculty to faculty, at some universities. While some universities have sought to ensure that current supervisors ought also to undertake training in supervision, at other institutions this is not a condition of remaining on the register of supervisors or otherwise being eligible to be a supervisor.

Case studies

Among the cases we have received from students, or have otherwise heard about, are matters involving:

- threats of suicide.
- complaints about a university responding in an inappropriate fashion to threats of suicide.
- illegal tape recordings made by students of interviews with their supervisors.
- allegations of criminal conduct and/or sexual harassment and/or racist conduct by supervisors.
- allegations that supervisors deliberately destroyed students' research material or otherwise acted to sabotage their students' research.
- allegations that supervisors have plagiarised students' work.

- conduct on the part of students towards their supervisors that could be potentially regarded as criminal, threatening or “stalking” to the extent that either universities or academics personally have had to seek restraining orders.

Identification of cases

There is little consistency between university practices about how these matters are identified for complaint-handling purposes.

Some of the universities with the largest number of post-graduate students have no means of identifying complaint numbers. Some other institutions rely on numbers being so low that complaint handlers are able to personally recall the complaints of this nature they handled.

The universities that have developed systems which allow them to readily identify concerns raised by postgraduate students have done so without reference to the records held by other institutions, so comparing the information collected by different universities will not necessarily reveal comparable information.

Information about postgraduate supervision issues

Most universities can show they include some general information about how disputes can be handled in the orientation of post graduate students. This, however, takes place at the very start of a student’s postgraduate career and at a time when a student is perhaps the least likely to be able to foresee any dark clouds on the horizon.

All universities have published policies and procedures available on their websites. Post graduate students ought to be able to access these. However, there may be value in publishing further information about potential difficulties and solutions in a more accessible format.

The UNSW Postgraduate Research Handbook or the University of Sydney’s Graduate Studies Handbook, for instance, are examples of publications that contains some simple but useful advice about the way forward to students who encounter difficulties with their candidatures.^{1 2} Other universities have similar publications, but a significant number have no advice to students outside the existence of policies and procedures and university rules.

The following advice in the University of Sydney’s Graduate Studies Handbook seems to us to be clear and useful and could be adopted by most universities (with necessary changes to make the advice accurate for each institution).

Resolution of problem

Problems arising for the student and teaching staff can and do occur. It is obviously desirable that these are addressed and settled as expeditiously as possible and preferably within the department/school.

¹ https://research.unsw.edu.au/document/grs_handbook_2015.pdf

² http://sydney.edu.au/handbooks/postgrad_hb/coursework/progress.shtml

A student may approach the head of department/school, the postgraduate coordinator or any other member of the permanent staff of the department/school, regarding the resolution of problems. The head and/or the postgraduate coordinator should attempt to settle the dispute. If this cannot be achieved within the department/school the matter may be referred to the dean or associate dean (postgraduate) of the faculty or the equivalent within the college.

A student who considers that resolution of difficulties within the department/school is not being achieved could also go to the dean or associate dean of the faculty.

Advice may also be sought from the student advisers located at SUPRA. Student advisers provide professional and confidential advice or referral about any matters that affect students, from academic issues, processes, problems and appeals, to general welfare.

Alternatively, the student may contact the [Counselling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#)

For problems that cannot be resolved at the faculty or college level please refer to the Section on Appeals against academic decisions.³

University policies

The policies of every university in NSW contain a broad commitment to ensure mechanisms are in place to promote regular consultation and interaction between supervisors and their students and to address conflicts that may arise between supervisors and candidates and ensure they are resolved in a timely and appropriate manner. Commonly, actions that would assist a positive culture are listed as the responsibilities of, respectively, the student, the supervisors, the faculty and the graduate research school or its equivalent.

Universities do not prescribe, at a policy level, what are considered to be satisfactory levels of supervision, in areas such as frequency of meetings, availability for consultation and the timelines for completion of tasks. Universities, however, should encourage records to be made of the arrangements that arise out of negotiations between students and their supervisors, as this gives a firmer basis to any subsequent investigation that needs to take place into whether these arrangements were reasonable and/or were adhered to by the parties involved.

Is an annual feedback system sufficient to detect problems?

One of the questions we asked all universities was: “What formal feedback/review processes, if any, are built into the supervision process for students and/or supervisors?”

³ Ibid.

The answer we received from almost all NSW universities is that they have an annual performance review or progress review for postgraduate candidates. Some candidates at some universities go through this process bi-annually.

Most universities offer a non-compulsory survey to students at the end of their candidature, but, when still engaged in on-going study, the annual performance review is usually the only formal opportunity for students to provide feedback on their supervisors. Their ability to do so confidentially differs from university to university.

The progress report is not primarily meant to provide an opportunity for HDR candidates to document issues of concerns with the supervision they are receiving. Its primary purpose is to allow students and their supervisors and other interested parties (in the faculty and in Research offices) to reflect on the progress of research and to assist with undertaking goal setting to bring research to a satisfactory conclusion.

Some thoughts on the system in operation

In practice, a situation which can occur is that a student will feel he or she is progressing well in his or her studies, until an annual progress report indicates to him or her this view is not shared by his or her supervisors. Of course, this should not happen without warning. The views of the supervisor should have been made known to the student previously. Unfortunately, however, it is the case that communication between supervisors and their students can be imperfect and/or ambiguous.

Our experience has been that students who have signed off on statements attesting themselves satisfied with the supervision they have received at annual progress reviews often subsequently bitterly recant their purported satisfaction at a future time. They tell us they have felt under duress to express satisfaction with the supervision they have received, without feeling that satisfaction.

A typical scenario that can be pieced together, much later on, is that a student considers one or all of his or her supervisors to lack expertise in the student's field of research, or to be uncommitted to moving research along, or to be moving research forward but along lines the student feels uncomfortable with. However, for as long as the student does not receive negative feedback, he or she is not likely to do anything to disturb the supervisory arrangements in place. The student wants the relationship to be a successful one. Only in retrospect will the student look back and denounce the shortcomings (either real or perceived) of their supervisors over the whole course of the candidacy.

The conflict escalation model proposed in the writings of the Austrian conflict facilitator, Friedrich Glasl, are of relevance here. The summary used here of some of Glasl's ideas is based on an article by Thomas Jordan.⁴

⁴ <http://www.mediate.com/articles/jordan.cfm#bio>

When conflicts arise there is often a point where genuine efforts to overcome difficulties can harden into a fixed position and the parties to a conflict find themselves locked into positions where each is suspicious of the others' good faith. In such cases, the parties to a dispute must exercise uncommonly good judgement to avoid abandoning disinterested argument for manipulative and/or emotional dispute. When the parties to a conflict start to see their interlocutors as adversaries, then even attempts to solve problems will be interpreted as tactics brought on by ulterior motives. Over time, communication between the parties to a conflict can shift into an accumulation of tactical advantages. As Thomas Jordan puts it:

These tactical tricks aim at keeping the counterpart off balance emotionally or at gaining the upper hand in a skirmish. The centre of gravity of the verbal interactions therefore shift from rational arguments towards emotions and relative power issues. The parties can no longer assume that words mean what they seem to mean, but have to look for veiled meanings and consequences. This introduces a strong propensity of mistrust in the relationships. The parties expect each other to try to gain advantages at the other's expense. To the extent that one party succeeds in gaining such advantages, the other is increasingly vexed, and starts looking for ways of compensating for them. Every statement and action gets additional significance, namely in terms of how they affect the reputation and relative position of the actor.⁵

As conflicts continue to escalate, a point can be reached where the parties will stop viewing their interaction in terms of what it should be (in this case, as a conversation about a given piece of research) in favour of seeing it as a fight where the reputations of the adversaries are the field of battle. At its most extreme, the parties to a dispute can cease to care about what damage is caused to their own reputation, so long as much damage as possible is done to their opponent's reputation.

A point that arises out of this view of conflict is that there is a strong instinct by the people directly involved in the conflict to view third parties who are drawn in to attempt to resolve a situation either as champions or as conspirators.

Of course, recognising that complaints about supervision are examples of a type of complaint that typically involve escalating stages of conflict does not mean, at all, that students will not present with genuine complaints. What it means is that the opportunity to resolve such complaints without recriminations is not unlimited.

Unfortunately, it would seem neither students nor their supervisors are always skilled at identifying when conflicts are close to reaching that critical stage, beyond which the conflict has become intractable to the extent that a "win-lose" or even a "lose-lose" outcome is likely.

⁵ Ibid.

Changing supervisors

When students and their supervisors fall out, sometimes the only genuine solution to the breakdown in the relationship is to end it. Notwithstanding this, NSW universities give only a minimum of guidance to students who may feel they are nearing or have reached a point of crisis of this severity. Several universities indicated to us that they do not wish to encourage students to change their supervisors and while this is understandable, there will be cases where more mischief will occur from an untenable supervisory relationship proceeding than would occur if it was ended.

Anecdotally, students who have changed their primary supervisor more than once are viewed with suspicion. One must guard against any unfair tendency to prejudgment, as any number of circumstances can contribute to the necessity to change supervisory arrangements. However, one obvious reason that might in some cases contribute to multiple turnover of supervisors could be traced back to the personality of the student.

One university that does incorporate potential changes of supervisory arrangements into its policy material is the University of Technology in its Code of Practice for Supervisors and Research Degree Students.

Students are able to negotiate a change in supervision with their supervisor and RAO [Responsible Academic Officer- each faculty at the University of Technology has a RAO who is responsible for overseeing all of the Faculty's research students]. Where there are personality clashes which prevent fruitful cooperation between the student and a supervisor, or any other problems not able to be resolved easily, steps should be taken as soon as possible to seek a resolution of the problems in discussion with the RAO. If alternative supervision is considered the only solution, the RAO should facilitate this process in the faculty. If no alternative supervision can be found, the matter should be referred by the RAO to the Dean, Graduate Research School.⁶

Early warning signs

For the reasons set out above, it would seem early detection of problems in a supervisory relationship is strongly to be encouraged, as, if a tension between a student and his or her supervisors can be detected before a matter has escalated into an intractable conflict, there is a far greater chance of a satisfactory resolution.

In the supervisory context, as in many other settings, there are signs that can alert universities that conflict may be escalating. Typical signs would include the parties to a supervisory relationship:

- failing to set regular appointments to monitor progress;
- not meeting agreed-upon deadlines;
- ignoring the advice they are given by the other party;
- failing to interact with one another in a responsive and respectful manner

⁶ <http://www.gsu.uts.edu.au/policies/codeofpractice.html>

- bad-mouthing one another in conversations with other staff or students;
- showing irritability or aggravation;
- exchanging bad-tempered or overly emotional communications;
- feeling their rights are being undermined.

These sorts of signs might be considered as “smoke” that a university should be on the lookout for so it can initiate appropriate action before a conflict manifests as “fire” and becomes open and destructive.

In everyday experience, however, while almost everybody agrees that smoke alarms are a good idea, many people end up disabling their alarms because of the nuisance caused by alarms being set off inadvertently. In the same way, it might appear that universities are reluctant to intervene in disputes between students and their supervisors out of a fear of being drawn into disputes that may otherwise go away or do not genuinely merit being raised to a higher level. A careful level of judgment is involved here, because there are resource implications in any attempt to take a prophylactic approach to complaint handling. That judgement, however, must take into account the cost (and not only the monetary cost) of those matters that turn not just into “fire”, but into emotional conflagration.

Conciliation

Parties who accept they are in conflict often find a genuine attempt to come together to settle their differences, once the conflict has been recognised, works well. Such a negotiation may be able to create ground rules to cover future interactions, or may serve as a context in which the parties involved can recognise areas for improvement in their own conduct.

Again, where the parties to a dispute agree to it, it has been found useful to involve a facilitator in the conciliation process.

There are a range of alternative dispute resolution procedures. The focus of preventative alternative dispute resolution ought to be on a resolution by whatever means are genuinely likely to do this. However, a resolution process that only holds things together for a short further period of time before a situation collapses into a fresh round of grievances, recriminations and complaints cannot be regarded as providing a genuine resolution. The approach that is most likely to make for a lasting resolution is one that moves beyond the particular issues in dispute and focuses on repairs to the relationship itself.

At the policy level, despite the potential usefulness of using alternative dispute resolution processes to assist in resolving grievances or conflicts that have not escalated to a point where conciliation is no longer plausible, NSW universities (with the exception of the University of New England) give little consideration or no consideration to adopting a structured ADR approach. However, a number of universities spoke to us about success stories when adopting this approach.

A bank of internal university mediators/conciliators/trained-dispute-resolution specialists would be useful so long as they can be both neutral and seen-to-be neutral. Once people who have a grievance start to perceive the scales are tipped against them, there would be a dramatic decrease in the usefulness of such an approach.

Conflicts increase in complexity

The more advanced a conflict has become before it is expressed in a grievance, the more complex it is likely to be. Complaints that are made as a rear-guard action when a student faces the prospect of being excluded from the university (usually for unsatisfactory progress) are never likely to be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties.

In a situation where a student faces the potential end of his or her academic career through exclusion, and, when asked to show cause why this should not take place, it is not uncommon that the student responds with a series of accusations about wrong conduct by a supervisor. Several university staff and student representatives also spoke with us about the worst sort of complaints being those from students who had bottled resentment against their supervisor up for years. There are a number of possible outcomes to such an encounter that ensues when these resentments are unleashed, but these do not include any where both parties to a conflict can feel satisfied. Either one party feels vanquished or humiliated while the other party is vindicated or one party is vanquished and the other party walks away from the engagement with a level of damage done to his or her reputation that might range from “slight” to “profound”. If it is at all possible to avoid these kinds of outcomes, universities should have a commitment to doing so. One of the key drivers of many ongoing conflicts is the need felt by one party to the conflict for vindication. This can often include a desire for retribution and sometimes compensation.

No-one wants to give bad news

There is a strong link between students who are identified as not making satisfactory progress and students who complain about one or more of their supervisors.

A surprisingly pervasive feature of any survey about complaints that arise out of the post graduate supervisory relationship is that many of them can be traced back to a situation where students seem to have been genuinely surprised to be told they were not making satisfactory progress. We receive relatively few complaints from students who were doing badly but either knew themselves to be doing badly or the available evidence indicated that the student had been given regular feedback that they were doing badly. It would seem many students who end by bringing forward significantly complex complaints have believed themselves to be tracking better than their supervisors believed.

The main reasons for such confusion arising are likely to be very simple. One is the well known reluctance of most sensitive people to be a bearer of bad news. Another is that the language in which bad news about academic progress is given is often susceptible to being given in ambiguous terms. Depending on how a message is framed and delivered, a student who is told what he or she is doing “needs some work” can interpret this either as “some minor tinkering is called for” or “a complete re-write is needed”.

Part of the training offered to prospective supervisors at some universities is training in “having difficult conversations”. This would appear to be an aspect of supervision to which all universities should pay heed in the interest of trying to ensure that students’ understanding of their progress is matched to that of their supervisors’.

International Students

The interviews we conducted with university officers towards this project indicated a range of views about whether complaints by international students differed in character from complaints by domestic students.

If student experience surveys are reliable then there is only a negligible difference in the supervisor satisfaction ratings given by international and domestic students. There is no strong statistical basis to back most assertions based on anecdotal evidence about how students from different regions adapt to post-graduate study in Australia.

However, the anecdotes we have heard are pervasive enough to merit being briefly summarised here. There is a perception among some complaint handlers that international students from some regions are either more or less likely to come forward to complain about the difficulties they experience with their supervisors having regard to cultural traditions about the amount of respect that should be showed to a supervisor. However, when faced with the potentially shameful prospect of being sent home without having successfully accomplished a course of study, it is believed the same international students who are least likely to come forward at an earlier stage become unusually tenacious in fighting against their study being terminated.

It is certainly the case that disputes surrounding international students more often than not have visa implications and can affect sponsorship arrangements. These immigration and financial concerns can make matters involving international students more complex and more time sensitive to deal with than other complaints. Also, in addition to the university’s responsibility to deal with matters in accordance with its rules, policies and procedures, the university is bound to consider its obligations under the *National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2007*.

Mental Health

Another factor that can complicate the investigation of disputes about post-graduate study is mental illness, which can either be diagnosed or undiagnosed. This is, of course, an enormously complex area. Many high-functioning people cope with significant illnesses including clinical depression and schizophrenia. There is no reason why students who are affected by these illnesses, or academics who are affected by these illnesses, should not be able to be involved in research. But it can be recognised that illnesses of this kind will produce challenges to which universities need to be sensitive. However, there are also violent or intimidating behaviours which cannot be tolerated. People who engage in such conduct should be warned to desist. If they should fail to do so, then, for the sake of everybody else, and even if they have limited capacity to change their behaviour, strong limits have to be placed on their interactions with staff and/or students of the university.

Anything that can be done to ensure that supervisors and university staff generally are better trained in contemporary issues in mental health would be welcome.

Conclusion

The complaints this office has received would seem to show there have been many cases where neither students nor their supervisors have been able to reliably identify when the time for lodging a formal grievance had come. Because no party wants their supervisory relationship to fail, there is a strong temptation to let matters drift along until a conflict reaches an irredeemable level of hostility. When a complaint is made, finally, and- at least in retrospect- inevitably, it is more likely to be complex, personal and as much driven by a desire for absolute vindication or revenge as by a desire for a plausible resolution.

There is no single quick fix to this problem. Recognising the problem exists is a first step. A willingness to move towards methods avoiding complaints from reaching that level of complexity, whenever possible, offers the closest we have to a way forward.

Suggestions

1. Universities take steps to ensure there is a “go-to” person to whom a student or supervisor who is experiencing significant difficulties in a supervisory relationship would be able to speak with. This could be done by nominating a person or a number of people in the office administering HDR Graduate Studies under a title such as “conflict resolution officer” or by having a designated “mentor” as a part of each supervision team. In the latter case, a “mentor” should not be the principal supervisor in any supervisory arrangement, but it should be set out clearly that a part of the mentor’s role was to monitor the general supervisory relationship.
2. A designated “mentor” figure should be part of the supervisory panel for any student who has changed his or her principal supervisor more than once, except when this has occurred through misadventure (such as the death, illness, resignation or retirement etc. of a supervisor).

3. The university should also consider appointing a “mentor” figure to any supervisory panel that includes a principal supervisor who has been the subject of multiple formal grievances from students within any three year period, regardless of whether any allegations against the supervisor were sustained. (The requirement could lapse after the supervisor had spent a reasonable period where no formal complaints were made against him or her of bullying or other conduct that could lead to sanction by the university).
4. The university should encourage any party in a supervisory panel who observes significant deterioration in the supervisory relationship to report on this to the “mentor”, conflict resolution officer and/or HDR Graduate Studies office.
5. Where significant disputes have arisen that seem susceptible to conciliation, universities should arrange for funding to be made available to allow dispute resolution professionals to become involved, if all parties agree to it and these processes appear to offer a way forward to situations involving conflict especially when this involves restoring relationships.
6. Students and supervisors should be encouraged to document the arrangements they make as to the level of supervision a student is entitled to expect and the responsibilities of both the student and the supervisor.
7. Universities that, at present, do not enable students to report back on perceived problems with their supervisory relationship confidentially at annual performance reviews should take steps to ensure it is possible for students to do so.
8. Advice on disputes and conflicts with supervisors should be available to students either in printed material or online, outside the official policies and procedures and rules of the university.
9. Universities should consider including in this advice an acknowledgment some supervisory relationships will not work and guidance on the steps a student will need to take to obtain a replacement supervisor in the event a relationship irretrievably breaks down.
10. Universities should continue to take steps to ensure that as many supervisors as possible have received training in the skills of supervision, with a particular emphasis on “having difficult conversations”.
11. Universities consider utilising the technology available to them to arrange for the school of graduate research (or its equivalent) to contact all HDR students by email at strategic times (both before and after annual reviews). The text below is intended only to be a suggestion, but the email should ask students to bring forward any issues they might be experiencing with their supervision by saying, in effect:

The university recognises that HDR study can be a very stressful period and that if your relationship with your supervisor is not a good one this can make it difficult for your research to thrive.

If you have any concerns about your supervisory arrangements, you can raise any issue you have by replying to this email. If your concerns are general in nature, they will be treated confidentially.

If you feel there is a problem with your relationship with a member of your supervisory panel, you do not have to ignore this, or hope it will simply go away. [a link to information on the university's dispute-resolution or conciliation process].

If you believe a supervisor is acting wrongly, by bullying you, or is acting dishonestly, by breaching the university's rules of academic conduct, there are options available to you which include lodging a grievance. Please be aware that, depending on the complaint you make, its subject may need to be advised that you have complained for the university to meet its requirements to act with procedural fairness [a link would be provided here to the university's relevant grievance policy and/or procedure]

12. Universities should take steps to ensure students who wish to make a formal complaint know where to go both inside or outside the university. This would include having easily available relevant referral information to each level of appeal or review available within the university and to the NSW Ombudsman, the Australian Research Integrity Committee, The Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency and the Independent Commission Against Corruption as well as professional bodies, schools or boards that regulate careers in certain occupations.

Submissions

We would welcome any further comments or submissions that universities wish to make on this discussion paper up to 19 February 2016. We will be discussing some of these issues at the annual Ombudsman University Complaint Handlers Forum which will be held on this date. We are likely to place a revised version of this discussion paper on our website after that date.