

Candidate-Supervisor Relationship Challenges: Pilot Study

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Pilot Study

Understanding University Responses to HDR Candidate-Supervisor Relationship Challenges

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Context



An extensive literature on 'good' supervision and best practice, including

- In-principle guidance on boundaries and protocols.
- Narratives (usually stories told by completed HDR) of specific instances of failure of supervision.
- ... but no systematic assessment of such failures.

Anecdotal experience of a range of issues observed by HDR managers (PVCs, Associate Deans, professional staff, etc.) and discussed in forums like ACGR,

- ... but unexamined in the literature.

Strong disbelief from many supervisors and academic managers that issues arose often enough to justify responses in policy (c.f. handling by exception).



Anecdotal: HDR supervision relationship challenges



In the original proposal:

- ‘sexual harassment and assault; development of romantic attachments between candidate and supervisor; bullying; abuse of power; unresolved but severe interpersonal conflict; neglect’.
- Indicative rather than exhaustive – these categories are easily extended or refined, e.g.,
 - conflict of interest,
 - inter-supervisor conflict or intimate relationships,
 - inattention to lack of progress, inconsistent or incoherent guidance,
 - discrimination and favouritism,
 - overly formulaic or prescriptive expectations unsuited to the specific work.
- The prevalence and impact of these are largely unexplored.

These kinds of issues are rarely enumerated or addressed individually in training and, even when they are problematic, cannot always be handled by typical institutional codes of conduct,

- Which tend to refer to generic behaviours such as respect, tolerance, and equity.



Respect.Now.Always



The 2016 R.N.A study was a deep examination of forms of sexual misconduct on campus (and elsewhere); student–student as much as staff–student.

- It did not recognise HDR as a category (informally estimated to be 3% of respondents).
- There was no acknowledgement of the specific issues for HDR and some were unexamined
 - Individual, office-based relationship with academics,
 - Fieldwork, travel, conferences,
 - Close-proximity labwork, extended hours,
 - Power imbalance due to career outcomes being closely tied to a single academic.

However, some University leaders seemed to feel that measures addressing R.N.A, e.g., physical safety on campus, meant that the significant issues were being responded to.



Design of AHRI pilot study



Fundamental questions:

- Is the anecdotal experience confined or widespread?
- Is there enough evidence of severe or significant issues to justify a quantitative, whole-of-community study that would inform responses in a rich way?

In the pilot,

- Two Universities, UNSW and Melbourne, whose PVCs sponsored the study.
- Undertaken as interviews with first responders: HDR coordinators (professional and academic), Heads of School and Associate Deans, counsellors, advisors in student associations.
 - Giving a manageable number of interviews (47), with people who have an overall view.
 - 'Safety on campus' officials omitted due to complexities – stronger requirements for confidentiality, transitions due to implementation of R.N.A.
 - ... but this did mean that sexual and abuse issues would be underrepresented, as they are not usually seen by the more generic first responders.



General findings and observations



Most of the interviewees were aware of instances of issues in most of the broad categories:

- mismatched expectations,
- communication problems,
- bullying,
- challenges arising from supervisor and candidate performance,
- conflicts of interest,
- inappropriate relationships and attachments,
- sexual harassment and sexual assault.

There was good agreement in the concerns of the interviewees and their reflections on how the issues might be addressed.

Some issues were more reciprocal than anticipated, e.g., HDR bullying supervisors.

In all of the categories, the issues could be severe.



How issues are managed?



- General reluctance by all parties to report formally.
- Candidates often reluctant to have others raise issue with supervisors.
- Strong preference for 'in-house' informal responses with PGC/school administrator
 - Quicker and more appropriate
 - Also reported that PGCs do seek advice or use senior staff as sounding boards
 - Email used extensively to document



Effective strategies to manage candidate-supervisor relationships and support candidates



Guidance on expectations, policies and reporting mechanisms are provided early, but many candidates do not recall this later in their candidature.

- Efforts to pre-emptively address expectations.
- 'Pre-confirmation' process.
- Enhanced communication channels.
- Candidate surveys.



Areas for greater attention



- *Application and screening processes*
 - Recruitment, screening, and selection not as robust as they could be.
 - Mismatch of expectations due to an initial lack of due diligence.
- *Independent Ambassador or Ombudsman*
 - Perceived or actual conflicts within a School can inhibit early interventions.
 - Provides a mechanism for an alternative to dispute resolution.
- *Enhanced training and support for supervisors*
 - Community of practice.
 - Good practice guide.
 - How to get engagement in such processes?
- *Mechanisms to increase supervisor accountability*



Where to now?



Coming back to our original questions that shaped this study

- Is the anecdotal experience confined or widespread?
- Is there enough evidence of severe or significant issues to justify a quantitative, whole-of-community study that would inform responses in a rich way?

We believe the answer is YES and are looking for support to begin the next phase of this project.

