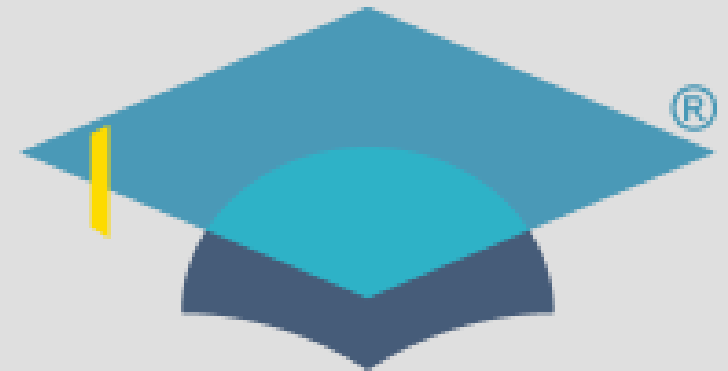


Challenging Conversations and HDR Complaint Resolution

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AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF
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Structure of Session



- Brief preamble summarising key challenges to complaint management and resolution
- Small group work using a range of scenarios
- Feedback
- Further actions for ACGR: preparation of a 'difficult conversation' toolkit?

Complaint management and resolution: the problem



- Most complaints come late in candidature
- It is difficult to manage an effective informal complaints process and few PG coordinators or equivalent are confident mediators
- Most supervisors shy away from what they perceive to be challenging conversations, and sometimes fail to report poor progress at an early stage
- HDR candidates rarely wish to make a formal complaint for fear of repercussions
- Some issues fall across a range of University policies with different processes, and even some internal contradiction
- Some complaints are baseless (but equally time consuming)
- Complainants can become trapped in the complaints cycle
- A candidate with a genuine complaint can be rejected by other prospective supervisors in their area
- At what stage (if at all) should DoGS be involved in informal complaint resolution, given they may have to lead an appeal at a later stage?

Scenario #1



“We know they are bad but....”

- You are approached by a Head of School to have a confidential conversation regarding a current staff member. This individual has been in their school well before you arrived at the university and has demonstrated poor research and supervisory skills during that time. A number of staff have raised concerns about this individual, although never in an official manner, and they are about to enter into a multi-centre research collaboration where they will be leading a key research area that has been strategically provided five HDR stipends.
- The Head of School has asked that you stop this individual from taking on any more HDR candidates. They currently can onboard all five. They also are unaware that this conversation is being held.

Scenario #2



A rotten supervisory culture?

- 10 HDR candidates ask to meet you to ‘informally discuss’ a range of issues relating to their experiences of supervision in their school. They are anxious that their supervisors will find out they are speaking up, but provide a long list of issues, which they claim summarise the experiences of many more students than the 10 who have come forward. The issues are broad and suggest a culture of highly inappropriate behaviours exhibited by a range of supervisors from the most senior to postdocs. They claim that the PG coordinators do not respect confidentiality and sometimes refuse to take student concerns seriously because the supervisor concerned is a good mate. The PG coordinators are all male. From an external perspective, the school appears to have a close-knit, highly social culture involving academics and HDR candidates.
- You are aware that a new Head of School has just been appointed. You need to brief the Head of School and yet find a way to allay the anxieties of the student group.

Scenario #3



“Prestige and poor behaviour”

- You have been approached by a staff member who provides support to HDR candidates within their school. They have indicated that two, possibly three, HDR candidates have an issue with their principal supervisor that borders on bullying. They made this accusation verbally to the staff member but wish to remain anonymous given that their supervisor is very well known in their field, and they feel that any complaint could impact their ability to gain employment after they leave. The supervisor is regarded in high esteem within their field and is often highlighted by the university for their work and the positive reputation they bring to the university. Because of this, the staff member who approached you is reluctant to meet with this person as they feel their intervention may be seen as ‘politically motivated’ and ‘counter to the university strategy’ from those higher up.

Scenario #4



When the complaint becomes the project...?

- A candidate meets you to explain that their primary supervisor has decided to cease supervision on the grounds that the candidate has not maintained regular meetings or completed work requested. The candidate explains that they have struggled with ill-health for some months; at the same time their partner endured a difficult and serious period of ill health and incapacity. You meet with the principal supervisor (it is clear the co-supervisor exists in name only) who explains his view that the candidate does not have the requisite skills or knowledge for the project and has not achieved any milestones. The PG coordinator has little to advise as they are terrified of repercussions from the supervisor as they both work in a very small field. You agree a compromise so that the candidate has the opportunity to submit a substantial piece of work for a much-delayed annual review. This is not deemed satisfactory, and you have sufficient concerns about the review to discuss with the Head of Department an option for external review of the candidate's work to date, with a view to changing the supervisory team. The candidate is late to respond to all requests and tends to respond with further questions. No work is forthcoming. You check your records and see that a few years before, this candidate withdrew from another HDR course at your university. You see that you had advised the school to think hard about admitting this candidate on a new course, but they proceeded. They now want you to make the problem go away.
- The latest candidate complaint is about you...

Scenario #5



“You only know what you know”

- You have been providing guidance to a staff member (Catherine) supporting an HDR candidate in their school. Catherine has come to you to get advice on the next steps for a thesis of poor quality that was submitted by a female candidate in their school. The issue seems straightforward until Catherine makes the comment, *“Well, the candidate likely rushed the completion of this thesis as the Principal Supervisor is known to have issues with women. Of course, you know about the HR issues, right?”* This was not ‘well known’ to you and Catherine indicates that *“they signed something with the school a few years back, but that is all I know”*. You are aware that this supervisor is about to take on an international female HDR candidate with an all-male supervisory team.

Scenario #6



Shopping around....

A candidate asks to meet and discuss concerns with their supervisory team. The principal supervisor is head of school and they believe this person exerts far too much influence over other their co-supervisors, who tend to agree with everything said. They take the trouble to describe the failings of the school leadership as they see it and the internal politics. They have supreme confidence in the potential of their project (still in its early stages) and are now shopping around in two other schools – they get a positive response from one potential supervisor, but the relevance of the project to that academic's research is not clear.

You speak with the head of school who expresses nothing but concern for the candidate and explains that there had been a very difficult meeting when it became clear that the candidate had very limited understanding of the key theoretical apparatus that would shape their project. There is no indication that the co-supervisors disagree with this view. The candidate believes it is their 'right' to change supervisors and schools and the current policies are rather vague on the topic. While her progress is not yet unsatisfactory according to agreed milestones, one reason to 'shop around' for a new team might be to delay that milestone further. There is anecdotal evidence that the candidate is sharing their views about their current supervisor and school widely with prospective new supervisors.

Who should be complaining about who and what?

Scenario #7



Sitting on the thesis...

- An international student has 1 month of candidature and scholarship left and a prestigious job lined up to commence in 6 weeks. They come to you in tears as their supervisor has had all drafted components of the thesis for 3 months but so far has only provided feedback on 2 chapters with 4 remaining. The student is very anxious and feels they have given their supervisor adequate time, but their supervisor keeps saying they are busy and will get to it. The student is very concerned that complaining may result in their supervisor taking even longer but they don't know what else to do. You know that this supervisor is the head of a research centre and is very busy.
- How do you convince them to prioritise the student's thesis without disclosing the complaint?

Scenario #8



Defining personal space...

- 4 students from a PhD office space that accommodates 6 students have come to you complaining about another student. The student appears to be almost living in the office as they are always there and talks to the others constantly, so they are not getting work done. They also eat very smelly food in the office. The students have tried asking them to leave them alone to work and stop eating in the office and it does stop for a couple of days but then starts again. The other students tell you they are feeling harassed and are uncomfortable in the office. In a worrying escalation the student has started calling their mobiles asking where they are if they are avoiding the office.
- How do you get the student to stop what is becoming harassment?

Scenario #9



Supervisor harassment....

- A principal supervisor has come to you complaining that a student is sending them up to 10 emails per day, including weekends, and constantly approaching them to discuss their research and other topics of interest. The most annoying situation was at a school social function where the student interrupted a conversation the supervisor was having with colleagues to show them an article on their laptop they wanted to discuss. The entire supervision panel had met with the student to advise them that the number of emails and other contact was unacceptable and set rules for the number of emails, timeframes for feedback and meetings. This worked for a couple of weeks, but things are now back to how they were. The supervisors have asked you to intervene, or they will withdraw supervision as they are feeling harassed.
- How do you help?

Complaint management and resolution: proposing a 'difficult conversation toolkit'



- Early candidature expectations setting and the facility for confidential feedback
- Compulsory training for PG coordinators in dispute resolution and challenging conversations
- Clear informal resolution procedures
- Clear policies which refer to each other and mirror procedures
- Robust supervisor training and easy to interpret university behaviour policies
- Anonymous reporting
- Ceiling on number of candidates per supervisor
- Clearer expectations on roles of all supervisors in ensuring candidate success
- Clear policy on circumstances where DoGS or Heads of School can prevent supervisors having new students, even without formal complaints
- Establishing an independent and dedicated institution-wide complaints management and mediation team
- Appointing a university ombud