Understanding HDR candidate-supervisor relationship challenges

A national study by the Australian Human Rights Institute

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Candidate-supervisor relationship challenges

- Anecdotally, HDR candidates are known to have distinct supervisory relationships

- In 2018, the two PVC Graduate Research from Melbourne and UNSW initiated a pilot study '*Understanding university responses to HDR candidate-supervisor relationship challenges'* in response to the limited systematic research then available about the incidence, impact and management of these issues

- Focus on professional and academic staff – rather than the candidates and supervisors themselves – was intentional

Candidate-supervisor relationship challenges

The pilot interviewed first responders to identify the range of issues in relationships that led to complaints or intervention.

- Mismatched expectations, communication problems

- Bullying (in both directions)

- Supervisor performance – neglect, lack of feedback

- Candidate performance – needing relentless management

- Conflicts of interest

- Inappropriate relationships and attachments; potentially, sexual issues

- Mental health concerns

Even though the findings were at a high level, this seems to have been a global first.

Candidate-supervisor relationship challenges – Phase 2

The pilot study suggested that more extensive research into candidate-supervisor relationships, explicitly incorporating the views and experiences of HDR candidates and their supervisors, would be valuable in complementing and expanding the findings.

The new report: a national study initiated and primarily funded by UoM and UNSW, with significant support from the ACGR and participating universities.

2025 report

The project was undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Institute and the Gendered Violence Research Network at UNSW Sydney, in collaboration with 10 participating universities and ACGR

Data gathered and participants interviewed in 2024

10 universities chose to participate, of a mix of kinds – 6 Go8, 3 other urban, JCU

- Survey open to all GR and supervisors; candidate response rates of 4.8% (1207 individuals) and supervisors response rate of 3.1% (641 individuals)

- 60 in-depth interviews (30 candidates, 30 supervisors)

2025 report

Caveat. Many statistics in the report are percentage by respondent; some questions have only small numbers of respondents

→ In very brief ... almost all issues were due to behaviours.

→ Difficulties with complaint handling were the main technical matter raised.

Perceptions of behaviours

Candidates on their supervisors:

- Not providing timely and constructive feedback on their work or progress (28.6%)

- Not clearly communicating expectations (25.8%)

- Ignoring candidates' attempts to communicate with them (23.2%)

Unprofessional behaviours were split between **academic** (e.g., authorship issues) and **social** (e.g., inappropriate personal curiosity). There were two reports of sexually inappropriate behaviours.

Unprofessional behaviours were less frequent than **threatening or discriminatory** behaviours (e.g., humiliation, offensive language).

Perceptions of behaviours …

Supervisors on their candidates:

- Not clearly communicating about the progress of their research (35.7%)

- Rebuffing or ignoring their Supervisors' academic feedback (32.6%)

- Having unrealistic expectations around their Supervisors' capacity to provide feedback on their research (28.7%)

- Misrepresenting their research background or capacity to undertake HDR-level research (17.6%)

Unprofessional behaviours were all **social** (e.g., unwanted seeking of friendship). There were six reports of **sexually inappropriate behaviours**.

Again: threatening, etc., behaviours (aggression, belittling, abusive language) were more common than other kinds of unprofessional behaviour.

Formal complaints

By candidates

- 58 of supervisor behaviours that made them feel ignored, overlooked or uncared for

- 18 of supervisor behaviours that were unprofessional or crossed professional boundaries

- 21 of supervisor behaviours that made them feel unsafe, threatened, bullied or discriminated against

By supervisors

- 28 of behaviours from candidates affecting their supervision practice (poor communication, unrealistic, deceptive, etc.)

- 6 of candidate behaviours that were unprofessional

- 8 of candidate behaviours that made them feel unsafe

Complaints ...

Poorly structured complaint mechanisms seem to be a common problem.

- Candidates don't know how to raise them

Anecdotally (not in the report) some supervisors are uncomfortable making complaints about candidates because of the implication that the issues are their fault for not supervising well.

Key supervisory failings

Main contributors to candidate dissatisfaction:

- Supervisors not having the requisite expertise to support their candidates

- Problematic dynamics within the supervisory team, such as supervisory relationships that are competitive or combative

- A lack of guidance, direction, or structure from supervisors

- Supervisors over-controlling or micro-managing the project

- Supervisors being 'too busy' for supervision meetings

- Supervisors failing to provide timely or detailed feedback on candidates' work

- Supervisors being unsupportive of candidates' personal circumstances, such as work and family commitments

Do these suggest new angles for supervisor training?

Table Work

1. What policy amendments might be used to address these findings?

2. How can we address these findings via supervisor training?

3. Are there changes to complaint pathways and mechanisms that can help?

As part of your discussions, what role do you think ACGR can play??

Next steps?

- 2026 National Student Safety Survey