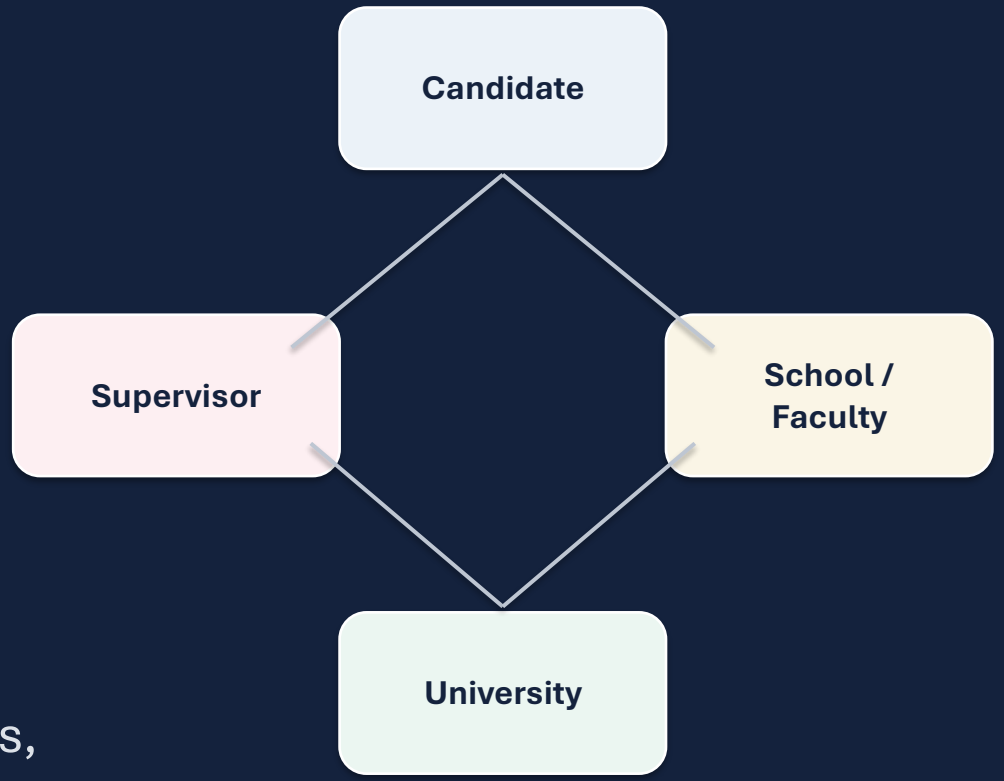
LEADING GRADUATE RESEARCH

Managing candidates, supporting supervisors, and influencing academic culture

Louise Sharpe, ACGR President



The role of Postgraduate Coordinators, Associate Deans, Deans and Directors

Strong leadership creates the conditions for good candidature and good supervision.

Graduate research needs leadership

Who is responsible for the quality of a PhD experience?

- Candidate
- Lead supervisor
- Supervisory team
- School / Faculty
- University

All of them. **But there has to be leadership across the system.**

Your role is not simply to manage candidature. It is to create the conditions in which good candidature and good supervision can occur.

You lead a system, not just individual candidates



The presenting problem

“My supervisor never gives me feedback.”
“I want to change supervisors.”

“My student isn't making progress.”
“My candidate won't take feedback.”

Leadership question: What is happening in the wider system?

Four dimensions of the leadership role

STEWARD

Protect academic standards
and the integrity of the degree.

COACH

Build the capability of
candidates and supervisors.

BROKER

Navigate competing perspectives,
interests and relationships.

BOUNDARY-SETTER

Know when support is needed —
and when expectations must be explicit.

Leadership does not mean solving every problem yourself.

Managing candidates: support + expectations



“I understand why this has been difficult — and we also need a realistic plan for what happens next.”

Compassion without clarity does not necessarily help the candidate.

Case: when good progress stalls

Priya — approaching the end of candidature

Strong first three years: data collected, conference presentations, publication.

Over nine months, chapters are repeatedly “nearly finished” but deadlines pass.

Meetings are cancelled; submitted work is incomplete and needs substantial revision.

Supervisors have responded with flexibility and revised deadlines — without improvement.

Priya remains confident she can submit within three months and resists closer monitoring.

Leadership dilemma

When does supportive flexibility become avoidance of a difficult conversation?

What would you do next?

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Leadership dilemma

When does supportive flexibility become avoidance of a difficult conversation?

What would you do next?

- clarify the gap
- establish a realistic plan
- document expectations
- decide when to escalate

When supervisory relationships become difficult

LISTEN

Hear the concern

→

ESTABLISH

What are the facts?

→

ASSESS

Power, safety, progress

→

DECIDE

Repair, change or escalate

Not every difficult supervisory relationship needs to end — but not every relationship should be preserved.

Key judgement: is the relationship repairable, safe and capable of supporting successful completion?

Managing supervisors: influence without taking over

1

ASK BEFORE TELLING

“What do you think is happening here?”

2

MAKE EXPECTATIONS EXPLICIT

“The candidate needs timely, usable feedback.”

3

SHIFT TO SHARED STANDARDS

“This is about what candidates should reasonably expect.”

And recognise excellent supervision — don't interact with supervisors only when something goes wrong.

Case: “I want to change supervisors”

Alex — second year PhD

Says the lead supervisor is unavailable, slow to provide feedback and highly critical.

Feels anxious before meetings and no longer wants to share early drafts.

Associate supervisor sees a difficult relationship, but also missed deadlines and rejected feedback.

Alex does not want mediation: “I've thought about this for months. I just want a new supervisor.”

The current supervisor has specialist expertise and leads the grant connected to the project.

Before acting...

1. What do you need to understand?

2. What can remain confidential?

3. Is repair appropriate?

4. Is a change feasible?

Don't immediately decide who is right.

Lead the culture, not just the cases

Repeated complaints about feedback	→	Clarify expectations for timely, usable feedback
Candidates dependent on one supervisor	→	Strengthen supervisory teams
Poor progress identified late	→	Improve milestone conversations
Supervisors avoid difficult conversations	→	Build capability in giving feedback

Individual problem → Pattern → **Leadership response**

FIVE PRINCIPLES OF STRONG GRADUATE RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

1	**INTERVENE EARLY**	Small problems are easier to resolve than entrenched ones.
2	**LISTEN BEFORE JUDGING**	The first account is rarely the whole story.
3	**EMPATHY + CLARITY**	Support and accountability are not opposites.
4	**INFLUENCE, DON'T RESCUE**	Build the capability of candidates and supervisors.
5	**LEAD THE CULTURE**	Use individual cases to identify where the system can improve.

Strong leadership is the safeguard

The success of graduate research depends enormously on individual supervisory relationships.

But we cannot leave the quality of the PhD experience to individual relationships alone.

Strong academic leadership creates the culture, expectations and safeguards that allow both candidates and supervisors to succeed.