

## Building local leadership in research education

### Scenario 7: Dealing with supervisor-student problems

Your Faculty has been successful in increasing HDR enrolments but supervisory capacity is now stretched. Within the first two weeks of starting in the REC role, you received a number of complaints from students about their supervisors. Two students say that they can't get sign off on their progress reports because their principal supervisor, a senior academic, has not met with them for more than six months. Another says that she has received no helpful feedback on her work, and that the supervisor hasn't helped her with a candidature confirmation paper due next week. A third student has complained about a 'personality clash' with his third supervisor in two years. The student's progress has not been satisfactory and he is now saying that he has been bullied.

Most of the complaining students want to change supervisors and have nominated people that you know are very good supervisors but already overcommitted.

1. Whose role is it to deal with problems with supervision?
2. Where would you start in addressing these complaints? How would you deal with them?
3. What changes could be made to reduce the frequency of supervisor-student problems in the Faculty? What would it take to implement these changes?

Further resources available from [www.first.edu.au](http://www.first.edu.au)

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Whose role is it to deal with problems with supervision?

Response

- Head of School normally deals with problems with supervisors but often they are left out of the loop when an issue starts to develop between a student and a supervisor.
- The REC should also be involved with dealing with the issue as they may have a better insight into the issues than the HOS.
- If the problem is at the HOS or REC level then the University Graduate School needs to be involved.
- If possible the problem should be dealt with as close to the supervisory relationship as possible.

Where would you start in addressing these complaints?

Response

- In the first instance, verify the nature of the problem with both sides of the issue unless there are mitigating circumstances which could cause counter-productive actions by either person involved but on the whole transparency and openness is the best approach.
- It is important to treat both sides of the issue equally and to determine the status of the issue.
- In most case the complaint should be recorded in a written format and a response requested from the other person.
- In the early stages of the disagreement records should be kept as extensively as possible in case the issue escalates.

How would you deal with them?

Response

- Determine if in your opinion that the matter can be dealt with locally, This is particularly the case where bullying has not been alleged.
- If bullying has been alleged in writing, then in most institutions a formal procedure comes into play and often it is taken out of the hand of the REC.
- In cases where bullying it not alleged and the matter can be resolved at the REC level, discuss the issue with both side extensively. Give both side plenty of time to put their case in their words.
- Attempt to find a solution which solves the problem with least disturbance to the student's studies if possible. In some cases this will not be possible, particularly if the problem lies with the student, in such cases it could be useful to contact student services or the student association.

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What changes could be made to reduce the frequency of supervisor-student problems in the Faculty?

Response

- Ensure supervisors are competent to supervise, either by removal of supervisors who will or cannot change their ways or preferably through training and counselling.
- Ensure associate or second supervisors are in place and are active in the supervision of students.
- Ensure students are aware of the HDR coordinator and what role they play in supervision.
- Ensure that there is a clear agreement or understanding between the supervisor and student of expectations and commitments on both sides.

What would it take to implement these changes?

Response

- Strong support for the REC in the relationship from the Head of School to implement changes required to help prevent such situations.
- Strong support from HoS on putting into place agreements at the beginning of candidature.
- Back up by HoS of the REC's judgement when appropriate
- Acceptance by supervisors that problems can occur and that they should be discussed early as possible with REC.
- Representation by students on HDR committee.
- Provide mediation and conflict resolution training for RECs

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