

Complaints about the supervision of postgraduate students

Discussion paper

October 2017

Complaints about the supervision of postgraduate students

Discussion Paper

October 2017

**NSW Ombudsman
Level 24, 580 George Street
Sydney NSW 2000**

Phone: 02 9286 1000

Toll free (outside Sydney Metro Area): 1800 451 524

Facsimile: 02 9283 2911

National Relay Service: 133 677

Website: www.ombo.nsw.gov.au

Email: nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au

ISBN 978-1-925569-50-6

© State of New South Wales, October 2017

This publication is released under a Creative Commons license CC BY 4.0.

Foreword

The NSW Ombudsman has jurisdiction over all public universities in NSW – ten universities in all. We receive and investigate complaints from students about administrative actions relating to their enrolment, course progress, supervision and termination of their studies.

At the Ombudsman’s office, we have worked with universities to develop tailored guidance for dealing with the unique issues that can arise in university complaints. An important stage in this work was in 2015 when we published, together with other Australian Ombudsman offices, *Complaint Handling at Universities: Australasian Best Practice Guidelines*. As the foreword to those guidelines observed about university complaints, ‘Mishandled complaints have a high potential cost, both financially and in damage to reputations’.

For several years, we have been looking into complaints that relate to postgraduate supervision in NSW universities. We have received a steady number of these complaints and they are often complex and time consuming to examine. They are also often accentuated by career and personal concerns reflected in the breakdown of research relationships between postgraduate students and supervisors.

In January 2016, we released a draft discussion paper to university complaint handlers in NSW. There was strong interest in the topic, with submissions from universities and discussions between Ombudsman and university staff and with representatives from postgraduate student organisations.

We have now decided to take the issue a step further by publishing a revised discussion paper that will be made more widely available on our website. This revised paper builds on the consultation that has occurred to date. It includes a number of suggested steps that could be taken by universities to refine their policies and practices to specifically address conflicts that may arise in postgraduate supervisory arrangements.

We invite submissions or comments from any interested parties by 31 January 2018 particularly examples of initiatives that have successfully resolved conflicts in postgraduate supervision. We will then decide if further action is needed to develop best practice guidelines or share practical examples and ideas among universities.

Professor John McMillan AO
Acting Ombudsman

October 2017

Contents

Foreword	e
Introduction	1
Why postgraduate complaints can be challenging	1
The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research	2
Difficulties in investigating postgraduate complaints	2
Similarities and differences between universities	2
Complaint issues	3
Informing postgraduate students about complaint pathways	3
University policies.....	4
Reviewing student performance	4
Concealed tensions	5
Changing supervisors	6
Warning signs and responses.....	7
Sending clear messages	8
Resolving disputes	8
International students	9
Considering mental illness	9
Steps towards a more structured framework for avoiding and resolving conflicts in postgraduate supervision	10

Introduction

This project arose from the steady number of complaints the NSW Ombudsman has received over many years about postgraduate supervision in NSW universities. These complaints can be complex and take time and resources to examine. They often also have a personal aspect which makes them especially challenging to deal with.

In January 2016, we published a draft discussion paper for university complaint handlers and received many helpful submissions in reply. We also reviewed relevant university policies, surveyed all NSW universities, conducted follow-up interviews with university staff at each institution, and spoke with representatives of several postgraduate student organisations. This current discussion paper has resulted from those conversations and the strong interest that we have encountered on this topic.

Universities in NSW have told us that complaints by postgraduate students are not overall more frequent than other kinds of student complaints. Allegations of academic or non-academic misconduct in postgraduate supervision are not sustained after investigation any more often than other student allegations. However, universities generally recognise that there is a potential for postgraduate complaints to be complex and bitterly-contested and significant resources can be spent in dealing with them.

This discussion paper aims to help all those involved share what they feel to be best practice in complaint handling in this field. This will hopefully facilitate a constructive exchange of ideas and experience. There is no implicit suggestion in this project that universities have dealt poorly with these matters in the past, or that some universities have performed poorly compared to others.

A number of universities have commented that the conversations leading to this discussion paper have been beneficial. For example, one university found that useful information it had published about dealing with conflicts between supervisors and students on a FAQ page on its website appeared only in the 'for supervisors' version of the page.

Universities have also moved of their own accord to address issues in response to the questions raised in our survey and follow-up interviews with interested parties. For example, some universities found that their policies were not as clear as they could be and have undertaken to revise them.

Why postgraduate complaints can be challenging

Even in ideal conditions, postgraduate study can be stressful.

If a dispute arises, the parties may be more argumentative and verbally skilful than normal. Complainants who have successfully completed a graduate degree have demonstrated a capacity to critically analyse information and to look at matters from different perspectives.

The relationship between postgraduate students, research centres and their personnel is unique. There are many facets to this relationship. The students are enrolled in an institution in a course of study for a higher degree. They are also often junior researchers and research trainees at an early but important stage of their professional careers. In another guise, they may have an employment relationship with the institution – for example, as a researcher employed on a grant-funded research project, or as a lecturer or tutor. Any complaints framework must accommodate these overlapping relationships.

A great deal may be at stake, both for the student and the supervisor. A student who complains about their supervisor may worry that their future academic or research career will be jeopardised. The supervisor, in turn, may be concerned that their academic standing and reputation will be tarnished if a complaint about them is sustained.

It was clear from our interviews that university staff recognise the importance and potential adverse impact of complaints about postgraduate supervision. There can be a high human cost for the individuals involved – relationships can be soured and careers threatened, and the emotional impact of these disputes can be felt by partners, family members and friends. Handling and investigating these complaints can also be resource intensive for universities.

The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research

The Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research is the primary source document to define the responsibilities of institutions and supervisors towards researchers. These are supplemented within individual institutions by their own policies and procedures. The Australian code is published by the National Health and Medical Research Council:

https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/_files_nhmrc/file/publications/r39_australian_code_responsible_conduct_research_150811.pdf

Difficulties in investigating postgraduate complaints

The relationship between students and supervisors is not by its nature a relationship between equals. A good supervisor will support a student, but must equally be ready to convey critical comments and perhaps dissatisfaction. One description is that ‘an ideal supervisor is positive, honest, caring, patient and brutal’. Inherent in that description is the potential for tension and complaint. Not surprisingly, a common element in the complaints against supervisors is an allegation of bullying.

No university that is part of this project has a practice of requiring the parties in a supervision arrangement to keep a detailed record of their interactions. Some supervisors require students to email details of agreements about meetings or completing research milestones – but that seems a minority practice, and the written record may not include student undertakings. If meeting notes are kept between supervisors and postgraduate students, they are likely to be brief and fragmentary.

This informality is not a problem in the vast majority of cases. However, when a serious dispute arises the lack of records can be a complicating factor. A serious dispute will commonly centre on events that occurred when two individuals were alone in a room having a conversation that was not recorded and where the respective memories of the conversation do not align. A third party investigating a complaint will have little material evidence to rely on to determine where the truth lies.

Similarities and differences between universities

Historically, the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales had a significantly larger number of postgraduate research students than the other eight NSW universities. This picture is changing. The number of postgraduate students at most of the other NSW universities are at historically high levels and are likely to grow in future years.

The administrative arrangements within universities have moved over the years to one in which postgraduate administration is handled by a central coordinating office, rather than individual faculties. This arrangement has been adopted as late as 2016 at the University of Sydney, when postgraduate administration was placed under the governance of the Administration Centre at the university.

Another change is that postgraduate students deal now with a supervisory panel, one of whom is the principal supervisor. In exceptional cases there may be just a single supervisor.

The majority of universities maintain a register of supervisors. All universities now offer training in supervision to academics who wish to be placed on the register – or, if no such register exists, who see themselves as potential supervisors. This training is mandatory for new supervisors in the majority of universities – although requirements can differ from faculty to faculty. Some universities require current supervisors to undertake training in supervision, while some do not.

Complaint issues

Some of the issues in complaints that we have seen include:

- threats of suicide by students
- universities responding in an inappropriate fashion to threats of suicide
- illegal tape recordings made by students of interviews with supervisors
- allegations of criminal conduct, sexual harassment and racist conduct by supervisors
- allegations that supervisors deliberately destroyed students' research material or otherwise sabotaged their research
- allegations that supervisors plagiarised students' work
- conduct on the part of students towards supervisors that could be potentially regarded as criminal, threatening or 'stalking' – and, in some cases, leading to universities or academics seeking a restraining order.

Our survey of universities showed little consistency in university practices in identifying issues for complaint handling purposes.

Some universities with a large number of postgraduate students had no means of identifying complaint numbers. Some others relied on numbers being so low that complaint handlers could personally recall the complaints they had handled.

Universities that had developed a system for recording postgraduate student concerns had done so independently of other universities. As a result, the information collected by one institution was not necessarily comparable to that collected by another.

Informing postgraduate students about complaint pathways

Most universities include at least general information about how disputes can be handled in the orientation pack for postgraduate students. However, this is provided at the start of a student's postgraduate career when they are probably unlikely to foresee a difficulty ahead.

All universities have policies and procedures on their websites that are accessible to postgraduate students. However, universities should perhaps consider extra ways of providing information to students on potential difficulties and pathways.

Two examples of publications that contain useful advice for students are the UNSW Postgraduate Research Handbook¹ and the University of Sydney Graduate Studies Handbook.² The 2015 University of Sydney Handbook provides the following advice:

Resolution of problem

Problems arising for the student and teaching staff can and do occur. It is obviously desirable that these are addressed and settled as expeditiously as possible and preferably within the department/school.

A student may approach the head of department/school, the postgraduate coordinator or any other member of the permanent staff of the department/school, regarding the resolution of problems. The head and/or the postgraduate coordinator should attempt to settle the dispute. If this cannot be achieved within the department/school the matter may be referred to the dean or associate dean (postgraduate) of the faculty or the equivalent within the college.

A student who considers that resolution of difficulties within the department/school is not being achieved could also go to the dean or associate dean of the faculty.

Advice may also be sought from the student advisers located at SUPRA. Student advisers provide professional and confidential advice or referral about any matters that affect students, from academic issues, processes, problems and appeals, to general welfare. Alternatively, the student may contact the Counselling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

For problems that cannot be resolved at the faculty or college level please refer to the Section on Appeals against academic decisions.

University policies

The policies of all NSW universities contain a broad commitment to having mechanisms in place to promote regular consultation and interaction between supervisors and students – and to ensure that conflicts that may arise between them are resolved in a timely and appropriate manner. The policies commonly state that it is the mutual responsibility of students, supervisors, faculties and graduate research centres to ensure a positive research and supervision culture.

Universities do not prescribe, at an overarching policy level, what are considered to be satisfactory levels of supervision – on matters, for example, such as frequency of meetings, availability for consultation, and timelines for completing tasks.

It would be useful if university policies encouraged a record to be made of the arrangements negotiated between students and supervisors. This would give a firmer basis for any subsequent investigation into the nature of agreed arrangements and whether they were reasonable and adhered to by both parties.

Reviewing student performance

A question we asked all universities was: “What formal feedback/review processes, if any, are built into the supervision process for students and/or supervisors?”

Nearly all universities answered that they have an annual performance or progress review for postgraduate students. Some students go through this process twice a year.

Most universities offer a non-compulsory survey to students at the end of their candidature. However, during the course of their study, the annual performance review is usually the only

1. https://research.unsw.edu.au/document/grs_handbook_2015.pdf

2. http://sydney.edu.au/handbooks/postgrad_hb/coursework/progress.shtml

formal opportunity for students to provide feedback on their supervisors. The ability to provide this feedback on a confidential basis differs from university to university.

It is not the primary purpose of the research progress report to document issues of concern by a student with the supervision they are receiving. The primary purpose is for students and supervisors and other interested parties in a faculty or research office to reflect on the progress of research and set goals to bring the research to a satisfactory conclusion.

A submission we received from a retired Pro Vice Chancellor (Research Operations) at the University of Adelaide explained that the university had insisted that the first annual review or confirmation of candidature was to be done by an expanded panel – charged with reviewing not only student progress but also the suitability of the supervisor-student relationship. The panels were advised to include an academic from outside the school or faculty as well as a faculty postgraduate coordinator. After each annual review, the Pro Vice Chancellor would interview a random sample of students to, as he put it, “see if they were hiding matters not expressed in their written report”.

Concealed tensions

A common pattern in cases we have seen is that a student will feel they were progressing well in their studies until the annual review, when a different view is expressed by one or other of their supervisors. Ideally any concerns would have been raised previously with the student, but this may not be practicable in some or many cases. The supervisors’ concerns may not have crystallised until this point or the previous communication between the student and supervisors may have been tentative, ambiguous or imperfect.

Our general experience is that a student who expressed satisfaction with the supervisory arrangement at the annual progress review may bitterly change their view at a future time. They often say they felt under duress to express satisfaction with the supervision they had received. A variation of this problem is that the student later complains that one or all of the supervisors lacked expertise in the student’s field of research, were uncommitted to moving the research along, or directed the research along a path that was uneasy for the student.

The underlying issue is that the student wants the supervisory relationship to be successful. If there is no negative feedback, or the feedback is unclear or mixed, the student is unlikely to express views that disturb the supervisory arrangement. Only in retrospect will the student denounce the shortcomings (real or perceived) of their supervisory arrangements or relationship.

The conflict escalation model proposed in the writings of the Austrian conflict facilitator, Friedrich Glasl, sheds light on this issue. The following summary of Glasl’s ideas is based on an article by Thomas Jordan.³

A point may arise in a conflict where the parties adopt a hardened view or fixed position and become suspicious of the other’s good faith. If so, uncommonly good judgement will be required for the parties to adopt a disinterested stance and avoid a manipulative and/or emotional dispute. When the parties to a conflict see the other people involved as adversaries, even attempts to solve a problem will be interpreted as tactics brought on by ulterior motives. Over time, communication between the conflicting parties can shift into a game of tactical advantage.

3. <http://www.mediate.com/articles/jordan.cfm#bio>

As Thomas Jordan puts it:

These tactical tricks aim at keeping the counterpart off balance emotionally or at gaining the upper hand in a skirmish. The centre of gravity of the verbal interactions therefore shifts from rational arguments towards emotions and relative power issues. The parties can no longer assume that words mean what they seem to mean, but have to look for veiled meanings and consequences. This introduces a strong propensity of mistrust in the relationships. The parties expect each other to try to gain advantages at the other's expense. To the extent that one party succeeds in gaining such advantages, the other is increasingly vexed, and starts looking for ways of compensating for them. Every statement and action gets additional significance, namely in terms of how they affect the reputation and relative position of the actor.⁴

In a conflict that is escalating, the parties will not see their interaction in terms of what it should be – in this situation, a conversation about a given piece of research. They instead see it as a fight in which the reputations of the adversaries are the field of battle. At its most extreme, the parties to the dispute will stop caring about the potential damage to their own reputation so long as greater damage is done to their opponent's reputation. A related feature of such conflicts is that the parties have a strong instinct to see third parties who may be drawn in to resolve the conflict either as champions or as conspirators.

This description is not meant to imply that students who are engaged in a bitter or escalating conflict do not have a genuine complaint – or, conversely, that supervisors have acted unprofessionally. The point is that the opportunity in these circumstances to resolve a complaint without recrimination may be limited. Also, neither students nor supervisors are always skilled at identifying when a conflict is close to reaching that critical stage – beyond which the conflict becomes intractable and a 'win-lose' or even 'lose-lose' outcome becomes the objective.

Changing supervisors

A practical and realistic option for addressing a breakdown in a supervisory relationship may be to terminate it and appoint a different supervisor. Generally, NSW universities give only minimal guidance to students who may feel they are nearing or have reached this crisis point. Several universities explained that they do not wish to encourage students to change supervisors. That is understandable, but if over-emphasised may fail to recognise the greater damage in continuing an untenable supervisory relationship.

Anecdotally, students who changed their primary supervisor more than once are viewed with suspicion. This may be traced in some cases to the personality of the student, but there may be other explanations that reflect less on the student and more on the unsuitability of the supervisory arrangements.

The University of Technology, Sydney, provides guidance on potential changes to supervisory arrangements in its 'Code of practice for supervisors and research degree students'.

Students are able to negotiate a change in supervision with their supervisor and RAO [Responsible Academic Officer, who is responsible in each faculty for overseeing research students]. Where there are personality clashes which prevent fruitful cooperation between the student and a supervisor, or any other problems not able to be resolved easily, steps should be taken as soon as possible to seek a resolution of the problems in discussion with the RAO. If alternative supervision is considered the only solution, the RAO should facilitate this process in the faculty. If no alternative supervision can be found, the matter should be referred by the RAO to the Dean, Graduate Research School.⁵

4. Ibid.

5. <http://www.gsu.uts.edu.au/policies/codeofpractice.html>

Warning signs and responses

Universities must be alert to signs that problems are brewing in a supervisory relationship. Early detection of problems may prevent them escalating into a more intractable conflict. Typical signs to watch for include:

- failure of the parties to set regular appointments to monitor progress
- failure to meet agreed deadlines
- a student ignoring a supervisor's advice
- failure of the parties to interact with each other in a responsive and respectful manner
- bad-mouthing the other in conversations with staff or students
- irritability or aggravation
- exchanging bad-tempered or overly emotional communications
- protestations about rights (or authority) being undermined.

It is admittedly a complex issue for a university to decide when and how to respond to the warning signs of a potential breakdown in a supervisory relationship. There is a heavy responsibility on the supervisor and student to work through difficulties in both the student's research progress and the supervisor's guidance and feedback. A university may be reluctant to intervene too early or forcefully before the parties to a supervisory relationship have had an opportunity to act reasonably and professionally to iron out emerging tensions.

The reality too is that many students – for a variety of career, personal and emotional reasons – decide not to continue with a course of postgraduate study. The supervisor and the university may not be fully aware of these other reasons. Any intervention by university staff to avoid a breakdown in the supervisory relationship may be misdirected or counterproductive. There is an obvious resource implication for universities in being too watchful or interventionist.

On the other hand, a grievance that is not addressed in a timely manner may well become entrenched and therefore more complex and difficult to unravel. An acute example is a grievance about supervision that is first put by a student who is facing termination or exclusion from further study for unsatisfactory progress. It is not uncommon that a student facing expulsion will respond by making accusations against the supervisor. Several university staff and student representatives who spoke to us referred to cases where students had bottled up their resentment against supervisors for many years. This can be followed by attempted retribution or a claim for compensation.

It is apparent in many of the complaints that we have handled that neither students nor supervisors could pinpoint when the stage was reached that external assistance or intervention would be desirable. No party wants the supervisory relationship to fail – and there is a strong temptation to let matters drift along until a conflict reaches an irredeemable level of hostility.

Despite these difficulties, the challenge for universities is to have procedures or mechanisms in place that require staff to be alert to any possible difficulties in a supervisory relationship. University guidelines or policy should spell out both the warning signs and the procedures and options for responding.

Sending clear messages

A strong feature in many complaints we receive about postgraduate supervision is that the students expressed genuine surprise at being told they were not making satisfactory progress. We receive relatively few complaints from students who either knew they were doing badly or had been given regular feedback to that effect.

It is understandable that advice from a supervisor about unsatisfactory progress may be muted or indirect. Many research projects are unclear at the outset or change direction midway after self-reflection by the student. A supervisor may not want to unsettle or discourage a student who is genuinely committed to the challenges and uncertainties that are inherent in postgraduate research.

The way a message to a student is framed may also be ambiguous or misunderstood. For example, the common observation that a piece of writing 'needs further work' may be interpreted by a student as a suggestion either for 'minor tinkering' or 'a complete re-write'. Cultural norms about conducting difficult conversations or avoiding confrontation may also have a bearing on how a message is conveyed and understood.

Some universities include a segment on 'having difficult conversations' in the training offered to prospective supervisors. All universities should consider adopting this approach to ensure better alignment between supervisors and students in their evaluation of the student's research progress.

Resolving disputes

A standard mechanism that is widely used in dispute resolution is conciliation. This enables the parties to come together and – with the assistance of an independent and neutral conciliator or facilitator – talk about the issues and make a good faith attempt to resolve their differences. The parties may also agree on ground rules to cover future interaction, or explore options for improving their relationship and altering their conduct.

Conciliation is only one form of alternative dispute resolution (ADR). A variety of overlapping methods are available to help parties to stand aside from a dispute and work through options for avoiding conflict or repairing a damaged supervisory relationship. In an academic setting, the focus should be on the parties moving beyond the immediate dispute and reaching an agreement or understanding that will last for the duration of what may be a lengthy research and supervision arrangement.

There is little recognition of ADR processes in the policies of the NSW universities – with the exception of the University of New England. However, universities do use ADR processes, as a number of them spoke to us about success stories when doing so. Universities could consider adopting a more structured framework that includes a panel of internal university mediators, conciliators, or trained dispute-resolution specialists that may be available for these purposes.

International students

An issue we explored in interviews with university staff was whether there were different patterns in complaints from international and domestic students.

Student experience surveys do not reveal any clear pattern – there is only a negligible difference in supervisor satisfaction ratings given by international and domestic students. On the other hand, the anecdotal impression that we gained from complaints and interviews tells a different story – although not one that is consistent among either domestic or international students or among international students from different national regions.

The perception among some university complaint handlers is that international students from some regions are either more likely to complain about difficulties they experience with a supervisor, or conversely less likely to complain. Lying behind this difference may be a cultural tradition about the level of respect to be shown to a supervisor. Equally, the story told to us is that some international students – when faced with the potentially shameful prospect of having to return home without successfully completing a course of study – will complain for the first time and become unusually tenacious in fighting against their study being terminated.

More often than not there can be scholarship and visa implications for an international student whose study is terminated. These immigration and financial concerns can add extra complexity to a dispute and lengthen the time taken to resolve it. International students have a mandatory visa requirement to maintain satisfactory course progress, and universities are required to report unsatisfactory course progress to the Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) under s 19 of the *Education Services for Overseas Students Act 2* and *Standard 10 of the National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2007*.

This provides an added reason for university course progress policies and procedures to define satisfactory and unsatisfactory course progress, and to include an intervention strategy designed to help international students improve to satisfactory levels.

Considering mental illness

Mental illness can be another matter that is a complicating factor in postgraduate complaints, as it is in complaint handling generally.

Mental illness spans a variety of conditions, ranging from clinical depression to schizophrenia or violent behaviour. An illness may be diagnosed or undiagnosed, could affect either a student or a supervisor, and may have a pivotal or no observable effect on a person's professional work.

Universities need to be alert to the possibility that mental illness may be an element in a supervisory conflict or breakdown. There are cases in the public domain where this has played out in prolonged disputes or litigation and with intimidating or violent behaviour. Supervisors and university staff should be trained to understand contemporary trends and challenges in dealing with mental health issues.

Steps towards a more structured framework for avoiding and resolving conflicts in postgraduate supervision

Difficulties and conflicts will always arise between postgraduate students and supervisors. The sensible path forward is therefore to develop a structured framework that acknowledges this possibility and implements steps to avoid or deal with it.

The following ten strategies – ranging from guidelines, training and record keeping to mentors, panels of ADR specialists and appeal mechanisms – could be included in such a structured framework:

1. Universities should prepare accessible written guidelines for students and supervisors on dealing with conflicts and disputes – including counselling, appointing a new supervisor, and referring disputes for conciliation. These guidelines should advise students and supervisors that problems can arise in all supervisory relationships that are not the fault of either party.
2. Universities should consider developing or continuing a structured training program for supervisors on the skills of supervision. This training should contain practical advice on dealing with problems in the supervisory relationship, such as ‘having difficult conversations’.
3. Members of supervisory panels should be advised when they start their role to take note of signs of deterioration in supervisory relationships, and report these to the conflict resolution officer in postgraduate administration or the ‘mentor’ if one has been appointed to the panel.
4. Students and supervisors should be encouraged to keep a written record of their supervisory arrangements, expectations and mutual responsibilities. Both could be encouraged to co-sign any important records.
5. Universities should implement a procedure whereby a student, after their annual performance review, can submit a confidential report on perceived problems in their supervisory relationship.
6. Universities should nominate a designated officer – a ‘go-to’ person – that a student or supervisor can speak to if they are experiencing significant difficulties in a supervisory relationship. This designated officer (or panel of officers) could be located or administered by the central university office responsible for postgraduate administration. They could be given a recognisable title, such as ‘conflict resolution officer’.
7. A designated student ‘mentor’ could be appointed to the supervisory panel for each student who has changed their principal supervisor more than once – with the exception of changes arising from matters such as the death, illness, resignation or retirement of a supervisor. The mentor’s role would be to monitor the general supervisory relationship, independent of the substance of the research project. It should also be understood that the appointment of a mentor is not seen as a negative or punitive response to the changes in supervisory arrangements.

Universities could also consider, on an individual basis, whether a ‘mentor’ should be appointed to a supervisory panel in other special circumstances. For example, if the principal supervisor is undertaking supervision for the first time – or the principal supervisor was involved previously in a sustained formal grievance process or was the subject of serious allegations of bullying or harassment. Including the mentor on the supervisory panel should be seen as a safeguard measure to minimise potential problems and provide independent feedback to the supervisors – not as a performance management measure that reflects on the supervisor’s suitability.

8. Universities should consider establishing a panel of internal university mediators, conciliators or trained dispute-resolution specialists who are available – with the consent of the parties – to deal with unresolved conflicts between students and supervisors.
9. Universities should consider implementing a structured program for contacting students by email at designated stages of a research project, and inviting them to raise or discuss on a confidential basis any issues they may be experiencing with their supervision. The following is suggested text to include in the email:

The university recognises that postgraduate study can be stressful. The stress will be greater if you feel you have an unsatisfactory academic relationship with your supervisor.

You may raise any concerns you have by replying to this email. Other options and procedures for dealing with problems you may be facing with your supervisor are outlined in the university’s guidance on postgraduate supervision, which is available at the following link: [a link to information on the university’s dispute-resolution or conciliation process].

If you believe your supervisor is acting improperly or unethically, you have the right to submit a formal grievance. The procedure for doing this is outlined in the university’s guidance on postgraduate supervision.

The university will receive any concerns you raise on a confidential basis. However, it may be necessary to discuss an issue with your supervisor or members of the supervisory panel if we are going to further investigate your complaint. We will discuss this with you before contacting your supervisor.

10. Students should be made aware – both in their induction material and through other accessible policies or guidance material – of the independent complaint and appeal mechanisms that are available to them. This includes the right to complain to the NSW Ombudsman, the Australian Research Integrity Committee, The Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, and the Independent Commission Against Corruption – as well as professional bodies, schools or boards that regulate careers in certain occupations.

Submissions close 31 January 2018

please include “Complaints about supervision of postgraduate students”
in the subject heading.

Email nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au.



NSW Ombudsman
Level 24, 580 George Street
Sydney NSW 2000

General enquiries: 02 9286 1000
Toll free (outside Sydney Metro Area, NSW only): 1800
451 524
National Relay Service: 133 677
Facsimile: 02 9283 2911

Email nswombo@ombo.nsw.gov.au

www.ombo.nsw.gov.au