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Expectation and boundary setting in the supervisor-candidate relationship

A guide for HDR Supervisors & Candidates

This guide is designed for HDR supervisors and candidates to work through together to aid in establishing and maintaining a professional relationship. Discussing mutual roles, responsibilities and expectations helps build trust and rapport: the foundations for a good working relationship. Establishing clear boundaries also helps to manage the power imbalance that exists between supervisor and candidate.

How to begin

This conversation should occur early in candidature. The onus is on supervisors to ensure the conversation is open and all have an equal opportunity to contribute.
The aim is to foster mutual understanding and respect, so the approach of all parties sets the tone.

Use the topics below as talking points to guide your discussion. Text-boxes can be used to record your comments if desired.

Step 1. Getting to know each other

Motivations and objectives: supervisors and candidates may have different motivations and objectives. Achieving a shared understanding of what these are is important to ensuring mutual compatibility.

• As a supervisor, what do you consider the main purpose of a research degree? What are the outcomes that you are hoping to see?

• As a candidate, what are your motivations for doing a research degree? What do you hope to achieve in terms of personal, professional and research outcomes?

Individual circumstances: understanding individual circumstances can assist in recognising challenges so that adjustments can be made and alternative arrangements put in place if required.

• What other responsibilities does each party have that are relevant to their availability and the degree success?

For example:
• Supervisor: what other workload commitments do you have?

• Candidate: what other commitments do you have, e.g; paid work, carer responsibilities? Are there any personal or health factors that may be helpful for the supervisor to know about? Is an [Equitable Learning Plan] required?

Step 2. Establishing roles and responsibilities

The supervisor-candidate relationship should be professional and respectful. Upholding professional standards requires adopting appropriate practices and managing the risk of boundary crossings, for example, due to conflicts of interest. This can be assisted by clarifying respective roles and responsibilities: what the supervisor's and candidate's respective roles are and – just as importantly – what they are not.

What are the supervisors' primary roles?

For example:
• Guiding the candidate in the design, development and conduct of the research project.
• Providing feedback and advice on draft work at agreed, regular intervals.
• Facilitating opportunities for professional development and networking (e.g. conferences, internships, sessional teaching), and selecting appropriate coursework and other co-curriculum opportunities.

What is NOT the supervisor's role?

For example:
  • Responding to requests for advice on-call and outside normal working hours.
  • Providing counselling, personal favours, or emotional support that exceeds a professional relationship.

What are the candidate's primary roles?

For example:
  • Conducting the day to day research.
  • Maintaining steady progress.

What is NOT the candidate's role?

For example:
• Doing unpaid work e.g; as a research or teaching assistant – in breach of the Fair Work Act.
• Working on-call and outside normal working hours.
• Providing counselling, personal favours, or emotional support that exceeds a professional relationship.

Step 3. Working arrangements

Agree on a supervision meeting schedule. As per the [HDR Progress Management Procedure,](#) meetings should normally occur at least once per fortnight or part-time equivalent. It is recommended that the candidate keeps records of supervisory meetings. All communication should be professional, courteous and respectful.

Meetings:

• What should be the frequency, duration, and location of meetings?

• Set appropriate boundaries by discussing working hours and availability. For example, it is not expected that work occurs outside normal working hours, nor that emails are checked at nights and on weekends.

• Decide responsibility for keeping meeting records and the time-frame for circulating the agenda and minutes. Decide where records will be stored, such as MS Teams.

• How long before a scheduled meeting should work be provided to supervisors?

Supervisory Team:

• What is the role of each member of the supervisory team?
• How will the team communicate to ensure everyone is informed?
• How often will all members of the team meet – e.g; will all attend each supervisory meeting?
• How much editorial and other feedback will supervisors provide on the candidates' writing?
• How will publishing arrangements be determined?

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Revisiting expectations and boundaries

Once established, expectations and boundaries need to be revisited from time to time as needs change. For example, it could be a six-monthly agenda item, or it may be tied to milestone reviews. It is important to set the tone for open communication, allowing for feedback and welcoming conversations about what is working and where there is room for improvement. Due to the power imbalance, candidates may feel uncomfortable about initiating difficult conversations without an invitation or prompt.

Further information and definitions

Key concepts:

Power imbalance: Refers to the inherently greater power and influence of supervisors compared to candidates. Candidates are highly reliant on supervisors for the success of their degree and this can impact their capacity to speak-up regarding inappropriate or unsatisfactory demands. Further, dependency compromises free consent, potentially enabling exploitation, sexual harassment and bullying. This power imbalance may be exacerbated by issues such as gender inequality. For example, female candidates in male-dominated research fields may feel discriminated against and unwelcome.

Professional standards: are the values and ways of working that apply to both supervisors and candidates. At RMIT, these are set out in the Student Conduct Policy, staff Code of Conduct and Workplace Behaviour Policy.

Boundaries: refers to the limits that are necessary to maintain the professional standards that apply in the supervisor – candidate relationship. Boundary crossings occur in departures from accepted norms and standards and boundary violations occur when one party is exploited by another. See Staff-Student Personal Relationships Procedure.

Supervisory good practice: Supervisors adopt a considered, student-centred approach that is structured yet flexible enough to be adaptable to the needs of individual candidates, the demands of the research project and changing circumstances, as per the RMIT Supervision Code of Practice.

Cultural diversity: The research training context is highly culturally and linguistically diverse. Cultural backgrounds can influence perceptions about expectations and boundaries. Misunderstandings can arise due to cultural differences or, conversely, cultural stereotypes, or shared-cultural assumptions. Refer to these International Education Association of Australia guides: for HDR Supervisors; for HDR Candidates

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Boundary Risk Management Guide

Minimal risk: arrangements that maintain appropriate professional boundaries	Maximum risk: arrangements that blur appropriate professional boundaries and may be construed as coercive
Working arrangements	
Agreeing on a meeting schedule and agenda in advance, taking minutes and keeping to time.	Ad hoc meetings without a clearly defined agenda and timeframe.
Setting agreed response times and clear and reasonable workload arrangements.	Routinely expecting work to be undertaken outside normal work hours or on-call.
Ensuring meetings occur in mutually accessible and agreeable, professional or public locations.	Arranging to meet in overly secluded, private or other settings that may make either party feel uncomfortable, for example, due to gender, cultural or other factors.
Establishing a publishing plan with mutually agreed authorship and contribution arrangements.	Pressuring either party to publish, misrepresent authorship and contribution or unfairly distribute the workload.
Ensuring paid research or teaching work is fairly distributed and the pay and time commitment is appropriate. Ensuring it is clearly distinguished from the research degree project.	Expecting unpaid work to be undertaken that would usually be a paid activity - such as teaching or marking. Limiting opportunities to a select few.
Ensuring professional development activities that lie outside the immediate scope of the research project are at the direction of the candidate, such as contributions to other candidates' research, media, or grant writing.	Expecting tasks to be undertaken that exceed the appropriate scope of the role and do not have any direct benefit to the candidate.
Interpersonal relationship	
Being courteous	Entering a close personal, intimate or sexual relationship. This would constitute a violation of professional boundaries
Socialising as part of research community activities and events, conferences, data collection activities etc. Ensuring activities are inclusive.	Socialising one on one, outside of workplace or professional related activities. Excluding some candidates from research group activities.
Providing advice about appropriate professional services	Requesting personal favours or emotional support.
Giving culturally and context appropriate gifts with a clear rationale – such as a token of appreciation from a field or conference trip	Giving expensive or inappropriate gifts with ambiguous intent

Getting help

Please refer to SGR's getting help webpage for information about support and other services. For information about this guide, contact Robyn Barnacle in the School of Graduate Research.

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