SUPRA
SYDNEY UNIVERSITY POSTGRADUATE REPRESENTATIVE ASSOCIATION

Submission to the NSW Ombudsman

Response to discussion paper:

Complaints about the supervision of postgraduate students

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Foreword

Sydney University Postgraduate Representative Association (SUPRA) is the representative organisation for postgraduate students at the University of Sydney. Established in 1970, SUPRA's constituency has grown to a point where today, around 28,000 students undertake postgraduate degrees and are represented by SUPRA, and are able to access our casework and legal services. Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students number around 5,000. Although most of our casework involves coursework postgraduates, we estimate about a third of our cases involve HDR candidates, and the most common presenting issue is concerns over supervision. Supervision cases for us, on average, demand more consultations with the student, more communication events with faculty and/or university staff, and generally more time than other cases. It is usual for us to have open cases for students complaining about supervision that remain unresolved for the length of their candidatures, sometimes up to four years. These cases carry a high burden on multiple levels for the student and arguably, their supervisor as well.

SUPRA welcomes the NSW Ombudsman's discussion paper on complaints about supervision of postgraduate students. We agree with the discussion points raised in the paper, and especially welcome the special focus on the experiences by international students and also the impact of mental illness on supervisory relationships. In our opinion, international students can start with a disadvantage whenever concerns over supervision emerge. Also we have seen too many cases where the mental health of the student has deteriorated as a result of the nature of the supervisory relationship and/or investigation process and the lengthy delays in coming to a resolution. SUPRA would like to point out the list of complaint issues (page 3) refer to actual complaints submitted to the NSW Ombudsman. The list of informal complaints that we have seen, that is those that do not progress to formal lodging and investigation, is lengthy. University of Sydney policies emphasise to students the importance of resolving supervisory conflicts at the local or faculty level. SUPRA supports a much greater focus by faculties on preventive measures in the first 12 months of HDR candidature, and 18 months for International students. In our opinion best practice strategies should build a local culture that allows for those early concerns and informal complaints about supervision

to be voiced and resolved appropriately. Our informal complaints list includes allegations by students that supervisors:

- used threatening and bullying behaviours
- within the lab group cultivated a climate of abuse/fear for the student (mobbing)
- passed unpublished data created by the student to other students
- frequently delayed returning written feedback with no explanation
- did not respond to emails from students
- shamed students for their work, sometimes in front of colleagues or other students
- were incompetent or provided poor quality feedback
- stole lab materials from the student
- forced students into unwanted work hours, and denied students legitimate leave (mostly relevant to International students)
- coerced students into unpaid work on grants and papers not related to their research project
- coerced students into unpaid labour and time used for training other students on lab protocols and use of equipment

We acknowledge and support the submission by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA), that highlighted the importance of access by postgraduate students to independent and well-resourced advocacy services, and support CAPA's additional recommendations.

> **SUPRA recommends** the implementation of CAPA's three calls for independent advocacy services, information about such services, and a preventative framework to university strategies about sexual assault and harassment in supervisory relationships.

Complaint issues/pathways

The discussion paper mentions threats of suicide by students as a complaint issue seen by the NSW Ombudsman (page 3). SUPRA has concerns over the manner in which universities respond to students in severe distress or expressing suicidal ideation. We call on universities to include responding to

distress and suicidal ideation in compulsory training for HDR supervisors.

> **SUPRA recommends** that supervisor training includes a component on mental health issues, especially suicide prevention, and the management of psychological distress, anxiety and depression.

Supervisory arrangements

The discussion paper asserts postgraduate students deal now with a supervisory panel (page 3). At the University of Sydney students have the option of a panel, but the majority of HDR students do not have a panel. Most candidates still have the traditional model of a principal supervisor plus a secondary or auxiliary supervisor. Many of our cases involving supervisory conflicts occur where the arrangement is a solo supervisor, or where a secondary supervisor is not active in the project, and usually does not engage with the primary supervisory relationship. SUPRA is interested in student experiences of a supervisory panel where supervision duties are reasonably shared between two or three academics.

> **SUPRA recommends** that universities offer HDR candidates the option of a supervisory panel, and that the NSW Ombudsman requests information from universities about their students' experiences with supervisory panels, and the overall uptake of this model of supervision.

Changing supervisors

SUPRA agrees with the point made in the discussion paper regarding difficulties for students in changing supervisors (page 6). In our experience many students who raise the idea of a change can often be made to feel that nobody in the faculty wants to or is available to supervise them. Where the supervisory relationship has broken down or is destructive to the student we believe the balance of responsibility to find a replacement supervisor should fall mostly on the faculty.

> **SUPRA recommends** that university policy makes faculties responsible for finding a replacement supervisor, where the supervisory relationship has broken down, and that such policy stipulates that this change be resolved in a timely manner.

Supervisor training

SUPRA would like to see some form of mandatory training for supervisors, at least every three years. We agree the training should sufficiently cover difficult conversations but also core skills in clear and culturally aware communication, constructive feedback, responding to students in distress, and conflict resolution.

> ***SUPRA recommends*** that all supervisors undergo compulsory and on-going training and re-training, which substantively address key issues for HDR students.

Successful supervision

Supervisors who have been involved in a sustained grievance process or were the subject of serious allegations of student bullying or harassment should be required to undertake additional training, and not permitted to have further students for supervision. At the same time, at some universities, for several years, postgraduate student associations, like SUPRA, have been running Research Supervisor of the Year awards, and SUPRA would like this student-driven initiative to be part of the Higher Degree by Research landscape in all universities. The award signals to the university research training community the standards and values that students seek in supervision, and plays a role in developing a supportive and truly collegiate culture for students.

> ***SUPRA recommends*** that good supervision practices and standards should be effectively incentivised, and that staff with records of poor supervision should be managed appropriately, to prevent further informal or formal complaints.

Resolving disputes

The discussion paper raises the potential for conciliation as a form of dispute resolution in academic settings (page 8). At the University of Sydney conciliation may be offered but the facilitator or conciliator is rarely independent and neutral, and most likely to be a member of the same faculty as the supervisor. This presents the usual limitations of bias or perception of bias by the student and indeed must be difficult for the faculty member who

may be qualified for conciliation and have the intention to be neutral, but is substantively a colleague to the student's supervisor. At times we have seen conciliation fail when the supervisor was senior to the conciliator and ignored direction by the conciliator.

SUPRA views conciliation as useful where the designated conciliator is qualified and independent of the faculty to which the student and supervisor belongs.

> **SUPRA recommends** conciliation procedures where supervisors must comply with the direction of the independent conciliator.

Comments on the 10 steps toward a more structured framework for avoiding and resolving conflicts in postgraduate supervision
SUPRA agrees with all the steps proposed in the discussion paper, and also comments further on the below step:

Step 5: Procedure to enable students to submit a confidential report on perceived problems in their supervisory relationship after the annual progress review, to a designated officer located in the central university office. This strengthens the level of confidentiality of such a report and aligns with the strategy outlined at point 6 in the paper, on designated conflict resolution officers.