



To: Neville Marsh, Dean of Graduate Studies

From: Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association

Subject: AUPGSA Response to *Evaluating Supervision*

Date: 26 November 2003

Dear Professor Marsh,

The Adelaide University Postgraduate Students' Association (AUPGSA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on, and contribute to, the Board of Research Education and Development's examination of the quality of HDR supervision. It is encouraging that the University is taking seriously the role that decent supervision plays in its research profile and the education of postgraduate researchers.

1. AUPGSA information and data about supervisory standards

Whilst the majority of HDR students are pleased with the quality of the supervision that they receive, a small number do experience substandard supervision. The AUPGSA's data collection provides an insight into the number of students, who face difficulties. In the first ten months of 2003, the AUPGSA was contacted by 11 different students to complain about the quality of the supervision that they were receiving and to seek assistance in resolving the situation. These 11 students then subsequently contacted the AUPGSA an additional 112 times for further assistance. These contacts account for 11.7% of all contacts from students until the end of October 2003. These statistics only include student contacts for which supervisory issues were the main concern; if supervision were only part of a larger issue, such as candidature, the contact would have been recorded in a different category.

These figures indicate what many suspect, namely that the majority of students are reasonably happy with the general quality of their supervision, but those students with issues are particularly unhappy, and the issues are not always easy to solve quickly. In 2003, the longest case with which the AUPGSA has been involved took over four months from the initial approach by the student until a solution that addressed most of the problems with supervision, and around nine months until the case was resolved completely.

These figures are by no means exhaustive: there are many students, who do not seek assistance in resolving the difficulties that they encounter. Although impossible to confirm, the current author suspects that only a minority of students do approach the AUPGSA for assistance, and only when the situation has deteriorated to a particularly bad state. In almost all cases in which the AUPGSA has been contacted, the student has invariably waited far too long before seeking assistance or advice. In some instances, the AUPGSA has taken a leading role in resolving the issue, whereas in others, the student has sought advice and felt comfortable in taking the matter further by himself/herself.

In many instances, students do not feel comfortable in seeking advice and assistance. From the AUPGSA's perspective, it is particularly frustrating when students approach the organisation for assistance, because they have legitimate serious grievances, but are unwilling to take any official action. It is impossible to assess how often this occurs, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the frequency with which it does is not insignificant. Some students fail to complete their courses because of the poor supervision that they have endured. If a student has not made an effort to resolve the situation whilst enrolled, it is unlikely that s/he will state the real reason for their undergoing attrition in an exit survey.

2. Defining the nature of good supervision

The discussion paper sums up well the issues that concern quantification the characteristics that define what good supervision is. It is important to acknowledge the differences that exist between disciplines and types of research. However, the discussion paper concentrates upon quantifying the nature of decent supervision from the University's perspective, but places little emphasis on the opinions of students. Whilst the views of students are unavoidably subjective, and two students with the same supervisor may disagree strongly with one another about their supervisor's capabilities, and may change depending on the current state of the student's project, students' views provide valuable insights that cannot be overlooked.

Unique perspectives that student feedback can provide include the individual support with which supervisors provide students when specific difficulties arise, the way in which supervisors collaborate and cooperate in joint or panel supervisory roles, and the availability of supervisors when students require assistance. Such issues cannot be measured by completion or publication rates, examiners' comments or similar benchmarks. A poor supervisor, who does not actively engage with his/her students may still have a high completion rate, which is due more to the students' own determination or support from other academics in the discipline, rather than excellent supervisory practice.

In addition, some students view any forum that the University provides for honest feedback with suspicion. Although there is little firm evidence to confirm it, substantial anecdotal evidence suggests that many students do not feel able to complete annual reviews and surveys with complete honesty, lest they be victimised because of their openness. The AUPGSA has direct experience of supervisors, postgraduate coordinators and discipline heads placing pressure on students to modify the comments that they have included in their annual reviews, so that the University does not take a dim view of the supervisor or discipline. Perhaps the only indication that exists to confirm that this practice does occur are the students, who in the first two annual reviews they complete, do not mention any grievances that they have, but after two or more years of frustration, complain about the issues that have affected them throughout their candidatures. In some instances, student suspicion also extends to the option of submitting a confidential letter as part of the annual review process.

In an attempt to address this issue, the AUPGSA is planning a survey to assess the level of satisfaction that postgraduate students have about their supervision. The survey shall address issues such as the:

- Overall satisfaction of supervisory practice;
- Role and input of postgraduate coordinators;
- Development and nurturing of a positive research environment;
- Completion of annual reviews and other forms of assessment of supervisory practice;
- Role that co-supervisors play and the real division of supervisory duties;
- Ease in seeking, and access to, support services to assist with supervisory issues;
- Comments made by other postgraduate students about their own supervision.

The AUPGSA envisages that the survey will be launched in January 2004, and due to the timing, will be kept open for up to two months to allow as many postgraduate students to complete it as possible.

3. Sources of information about the quality of supervision

The list of possible data sources that is included in the discussion paper is reasonably comprehensive and provides a firm basis from which to establish a procedure to assess the quality of supervision.

Possible other sources could be information from the AUPGSA. The AUPGSA has considerable knowledge and experience in dealing with students from all areas of the University. Whilst it is not in a position to discuss individual cases without the student's permission, it is able to provide data and information about trends in individual disciplines and faculties. Whilst supervisory issues usually only affect individuals, they can be symptomatic of larger issues within a discipline that affect other postgraduate students.

The role and effectiveness of the postgraduate coordinator should also be included as a possible source of information. With the increasingly important role that the postgraduate coordinator plays, a poor coordinator may have a detrimental effect on the quality of supervision that is provided within the discipline. If information is not distributed by the coordinator to supervisors, or s/he is unwilling to establish an extensive, relevant program to assist postgraduate development, the general quality of supervision will be affected.

The AUPGSA cautions against relying too heavily on awards presented to staff – including its own annual awards. With the increase in popularity that the AUPGSA Awards have enjoyed in the last two years, there is a danger that they may be devalued by the number of students nominating their supervisors. On the one hand, the increase in the number of nominations may be a positive reflection on the quality of supervision at the University; on the other hand, students may see the awards as a way of gaining favour with their supervisors. This suspicion may be partially confirmed by the comments of judging panel members, who have on occasion been very surprised to see certain supervisors nominated, given the negative feedback that they have had about them. The AUPGSA plans to address the possible deficiencies in its awards for 2004.

The AUPGSA is also very cautious about using the Stephen Cole the Elder Prize as an accurate way to assess supervision. The AUPGSA has been surprised by some of the recent recipients of the prize, as it has received considerable negative feedback about the poor teaching and supervision that some of the recent recipients provide. Whilst only one official complaint has been received about a recent Stephen Cole recipient, the current author has dealt with a number of other students, who have declined to instigate an official grievance against their supervisors.

Another idea that the AUPGSA has discussed is the composition of a confidential register of supervisors, about whom the AUPGSA receives complaints. Due to the personalities that are involved in any dispute, the nature of such a list would need to be considered carefully. The nature of a register would be to err on the side of caution, so as not to vilify supervisors, who are not guilty of providing poor supervision. A detailed description of any complaint included in the register would be included, so as to help confirm its veracity. A supervisor's name would not be added to the register unless it were felt that strong evidence existed to support the adding of the individual's name. The register would be made available to the Dean of Graduate Studies on a confidential basis for the assessment of supervisory practice, if the Dean so requested. At this point in time, the AUPGSA discussions are at the preliminary stage and no action has been taken to approve or reject the suggestion.

4. Conclusion

The AUPGSA strongly supports the introduction of measures of the quality of postgraduate supervision. In an environment in which increasing pressures are forcing fast and successful completions, supervisory standards need to be examined. The AUPGSA looks forward to working with the University in examining the issue and, if the need arises, participating in programs to improve the general standard of supervision at the University, as well working with individual supervisors to improve their skills in supervising postgraduate students.