



AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF
GRADUATE RESEARCH

Case Studies

Case Study 1 : A Complicated PhD Examination



You are a recently appointed Dean of Graduate Studies, and chairing one of your first Examination Panel meetings: this is where complicated HDR examination results are discussed and the way forward decided. Often, the complication arises when thesis examiners disagree significantly on the thesis.

In this instance:

- The 2 examiners returned recommendations to 1) pass with minor amendments, and 2) fail the thesis.
- Both examiners wrote considered reports to support their recommendation. Both highlighted (somewhat similar) conceptual and methodological concerns with the work and an inattention to grammar and spelling in the thesis.
- The student and supervisors have sent a written appeal to Examination Panel, requesting a third examiner be invited to examine the thesis. Their basis for this is that the examiner who failed the thesis didn't understand the work, and there are doubts about his expertise to examine such a thesis.
- The day before the Examination Panel meeting, the Associate Dean Research Education in the faculty has contacted you to say that the principal supervisor contacted the 'failing' examiner on receiving the examination report. It seems that they had talked at conferences previously. According to the Associate Dean, the principal supervisor has said that the examiner was reluctant to fail the thesis, and would be agreeable to changing their recommendation, if asked.



Discuss

- Identify the key issues in this situation.
- Discuss the actions you will need to take as Chair of the Examinations Panel.
- How will you progress the matter of the thesis examination?
- What aspects of the examination process might require further refinement as a result of this case?



Case Study 2 : Supervision

You receive a complaint (submitted by several HDR candidates) about inappropriate behaviour of their supervisor who is a high-profile academic with a stellar research track record. The candidates report to you that the supervisor is being unreasonably controlling and demanding and they are all requesting a change of supervisor.

The issues they raised included that their supervisor:

- threatens them with loss of their scholarship if they do not perform,
- changes their topics without consultation,
- treats them like research assistants by telling them what they must do
- frequently cancels meetings with them
- does not provide timely feedback on their writing so they felt a lack of guidance
- relating to the latter point, documents they submit to the supervisor for review are often not returned until 3 to 6 months following their submission.



Discuss

- What went wrong and what could the supervisor have done differently in this case?
- How would you as a PGC/AD/Dean manage this matter?
- What are some of the skills that you could advise the supervisor to develop so that they could be more effective supervisor in the future?



Case Study 3: Complex candidature

You have a student who for more than four years has been pursuing, on a part-time basis, a 'master of music in performance' degree. The student has fulfilled all of her coursework and performance obligations and now needs only to submit her 20,000-word thesis. Unfortunately, the actual writing of the thesis has barely been started, and already the student has gone well beyond her allotted time.

The student complains that the reasons for her delay in writing are that, first of all, she has not been taught how to write a thesis, and, secondly, that all her various supervisors over the course of almost five years have alternately bullied and harassed her, and then instigated 'punishments' (such as refusal to allow attendance at conferences) whenever she expressed dissatisfaction. Very near to the end of her extended deadline, the student brings in a lengthy written summary of all the alleged incidents of bullying, harassment, etc., conducted by her current supervisor, who is known as a reliable and committed academic.



Discuss

- How does your university approach students who have already exceeded candidature?
- What options would you consider to deal with the matter of the final thesis component?
- Is it possible to separate academic matters from complaints in this case?
- You call a case conference with your graduate school colleagues: how do you determine an appropriate order for the actions you need to take?
- What policy or other settings might you review as a result of this case?