

# PRINCIPLES

FOR RESPECTFUL SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIPS



**RESPECT.  
NOW.  
ALWAYS.**

# INTRODUCTION

Universities have legal, regulatory and ethical obligations to provide a high-quality supportive and safe learning environment for their students. Our organisations recognise that there is a power imbalance between students and their supervisors, and a sexual or romantic relationship that occurs within this power imbalance raises serious questions about capacity for consent and academic integrity.

Universities Australia, the National Tertiary Education Union, the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations and the Australian Council of Graduate Research have jointly developed this set of principles to underpin the relationship between postgraduate research students and their academic supervisors. The principles can also be used in the supervision of honours students and postgraduate coursework students. They are designed to protect and promote the safety and wellbeing of students and staff.

These principles complement the comprehensive work Australian universities are undertaking to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment in their communities and more widely.

In February 2016, Universities Australia launched the *Respect. Now. Always.* initiative. A global first, this initiative brought together Australia's 39 comprehensive universities to work collectively to prevent sexual assault and sexual harassment, and to share best practice on how to support affected students. These principles are one element of work undertaken as part of Universities Australia's 10-Point Action Plan, which outlines further sector-wide initiatives around sexual violence prevention and education.

These principles provide universities with high-level guidance and are to be read alongside the policies and procedures of individual institutions. Universities, as autonomous organisations, are responsible for the way they incorporate these principles into institutional codes of conduct and other policies or governance documents relating to research supervision.

No one should ever experience sexual assault or sexual harassment and these behaviours can never be excused or justified. Our respective organisations are united in our commitment to prevent these unacceptable behaviours and better support people affected by them.

# PRINCIPLES

## **A SEXUAL OR ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A SUPERVISOR AND THEIR STUDENT IS NEVER APPROPRIATE.**

Staff who engage in a sexual relationship with their student harm the learning and research environment of that student and other students. Such a relationship also compromises the academic integrity of all parties, including the university.

Universities' relevant policies, for example a conflict of interest policy, should state clearly that sexual/romantic relationships between supervisors and their students are never appropriate. These policies should specify the actions to be taken if such a relationship occurs, including the removal of the staff member from supervisory, teaching or assessment roles involving that student, and how alternative supervision arrangements will be made.

## **UNIVERSITIES RECOGNISE THERE IS A POWER IMBALANCE IN THE SUPERVISOR-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP AND THAT THE GREATER POWER RESTS WITH THE SUPERVISOR.**

There is a considerable power imbalance between a supervisor and their student. Supervisors have a significant influence on the student's successful completion of their research and, in turn, future career directions. This unequal power dynamic means that the relationship can potentially be vulnerable to exploitation and can affect the capacity of a student to consent freely to sex or relationships initiated by their supervisor.

A student's academic progress must never depend on consenting to a sexual relationship with their supervisor or a member of staff. Universities encourage students to report such demands to their institutions, and universities should take immediate action on these reports and investigate under the relevant reporting mechanisms.

## **THE PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN A SUPERVISOR AND THEIR STUDENT IS CHARACTERISED BY MUTUAL RESPECT AND TRUST.**

Respect and trust are the critical foundations of a high-quality, supportive and safe university learning environment. Students are more likely to achieve their academic goals in an atmosphere built on these values.

## **EXPECTATIONS, ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF STUDENTS AND THEIR SUPERVISORS ARE CLEAR.**

Both supervisors and students have rights and responsibilities as outlined in their institution's code of conduct, enterprise agreement or research supervision policy (or similar policy document). These documents need to include expected standards of behaviour. Universities should build awareness of, and provide training on, these standards for both staff and students.

Supervisors should use the Australian Council of Graduate Research's Good Practice Principles to ensure high-quality supervision and professional mentorship, including pastoral and personal support for the student.

Institutional policies and codes that relate to research supervision need to include details of relevant contact points in the university should a staff member or student wish to lodge a formal report of sexual assault or sexual harassment.

## **SAFEGUARDS ARE USED TO PROTECT STUDENTS FROM SITUATIONS OF RISK AND UNWANTED ADVANCES FROM THEIR SUPERVISORS.**

Establishing co-supervisory arrangements – or a panel of supervisors – for a research student may mitigate any risk that a student may face when one student works closely with an individual supervisor.

Research students often have field work, attend conferences or undertake work experience as part of their research degree. Such engagements can take place in remote or unfamiliar locations, or in workplaces where there are few, or no, university staff or peers. Students need to be appropriately supported and safe from situations that may place them at risk of sexual harassment or sexual assault.

## **SEXUAL ASSAULT AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT ARE UNACCEPTABLE.**

University codes of conduct should include specific reference to sexual harassment and sexual assault, sexist behaviour and gender-based violence. Codes should state that these behaviours are unacceptable, prohibited and, in some cases, criminal. In addition, universities should have targeted strategies and policies in place, preferably supported by industrial provisions, which extend to the entire university community.

All students and staff should be provided with the university's policy on sexual assault and sexual harassment, information about support available to those affected by these unacceptable behaviours, and reporting options within and external to the university.

## **THE SAFETY AND WELLBEING OF ANYONE WHO REPORTS SEXUAL ASSAULT OR SEXUAL HARASSMENT ARE PROMOTED AND PROTECTED BY THE UNIVERSITY.**

The safety and wellbeing of the reporting student or staff member are the university's first priority. Universities will have policies in place to support the arrangement of alternative research supervision when a disclosure or formal report is made.

## **DISCLOSURES OR FORMAL REPORTS OF SEXUAL ASSAULT OR SEXUAL HARASSMENT ARE MET WITH SUPPORT AND COMPASSION.**

University staff who receive a disclosure or formal report will be compassionate and supportive. Staff will provide information to the affected person on support services both within and external to the university.

The university will provide information on options for formally reporting the incident to the university and to external agencies, such as the police, and will provide appropriate support and assistance in all circumstances.

The university will respect the decision of the person whether to report the incident to police. There are circumstances, however, where universities have legal obligations to report the incident to the police. Having properly determined that this is the case, the university will inform and support the person making the disclosure or formal report. The person disclosing or reporting has the right to determine if they want to be part of any further investigation.

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**UNIVERSITIES  
AUSTRALIA**