



Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations Incorporated

Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA)

Submission to AHRC National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces

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Compiled with the assistance of the staff and office bearers of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) and its affiliated member organisations.

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Foreword

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) is the peak body representing the interests of the over 425,000 postgraduate students in Australia. We represent coursework and research, as well as domestic and international, postgraduates. We are comprised of 28 university and campus based postgraduate associations, as well as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Postgraduate Association (NATSIPA).

CAPA carries out its mission through policy, research, and activism, communicating the interests and issues of postgraduate students to higher education stakeholders as well as Federal and State Governments, Opposition parties, and minor parties.

We welcome this opportunity to deliver the postgraduate student perspective to the National Inquiry into Sexual Harassment in Australian Workplaces. We applaud the Australian Human Rights Commission's efforts to investigate and reduce workplace harassment, and their contributions to addressing gendered violence in our society.

In this submission, we focus on harassment experienced by postgraduate research students in the course of their studies and employment at education providers. Higher Degree by Research (HDR) students occupy a hybrid space in which they are considered students, but in many cases face expectations and working conditions in line with those of staff. Research students and paid research staff may be working alongside one another on the same project and with similar hours and expectations of work output. Unfortunately, some HDR students face harassment and other inappropriate behaviour from their research supervisors and/or colleagues. Students in these situations fear the consequences for their research and career if they report. Many HDR students are also employed at their university as teaching or research staff, almost always in precarious employment conditions which cause them to be reluctant to report experiences of workplace harassment. We make the following recommendations to improve uptake of reporting channels:

Recommendation one: That all Australian universities and research institutes formally adopt the Principles for Respectful Supervisory Relationships.

Recommendation two: That all Australian universities use the ACGR Respectful Research Training package for educating doctoral students and supervisors on appropriate supervision relationships.

Recommendation three: That clear reporting processes on off-site harassment incidents be established for university students and staff.

Recommendation four: That universities must drastically reduce the use of casual and short-term staff in teaching and research positions, so that staff feel less fearful of reporting workplace harassment.

These recommendations will go some way to address current issues of low reporting rates, however, more action is needed to create the cultural change necessary to eradicate workplace harassment and its gendered patterns.

We acknowledge the continued advocacy and activism of student groups on the issue of sexual violence in university communities. The efforts of the volunteer leaders of End Rape on Campus Australia, successive National Union of Students women's officers, and student

leaders at Australian universities, have ensured that this issue can no longer be ignored by university management.

Reporting processes

Since the Change the Course report into sexual violence at universities (AHRC, 2017), universities have reviewed, improved, and introduced policies to handle reported incidents. We acknowledge these changes, noting that not all are adequate in addressing issues specific to research students. Moreover, despite these efforts, it remains the case that sexual harassment is prevalent in many areas of the university, and that perpetrators suffer few consequences.

While many students and staff are aware of the university's policy and complaint processes, these processes are in many cases inadequate and do not facilitate reporting. This is reflected in the low reporting to universities while individuals feel more comfortable disclosing to their union, student representatives and End Rape on Campus. This discrepancy indicates that individuals have a lack of trust in the universities to address the issue, with many fearing that it would lead to negative consequences related to their degrees and future job prospects. In the National Tertiary Education Union's submission to this inquiry, they surveyed university staff and found that over one third did not report an incident that they had experienced due to not trusting the complaints process (NTEU 2019). The NTEU also found that, of those who did make a complaint, 60% were unhappy with the complaints process and outcome. Similarly, Science & Technology Australia (2019) found, in their survey of scientists, that one third of respondents thought their workplace had inadequate policies for addressing reported incidents. We agree with the NTEU's assessment that complaints processes are too onerous on the individual and that legislative change will be required to broaden the scope of how staff complaints can be lodged and pursued (NTEU 2019).

We believe that the reluctance of staff and students to report is reflective of universities using a framework of risk and liability to handle sexual assault and harassment. It is crucial that universities change their supervision culture and employment practices in order to empower their staff and students to report experiences of sexual harassment.

Inappropriate supervision behaviour

Research students must have one or more supervisors, with the supervisor being a senior researcher who provides guidance on their project. The supervisor becomes the student's strongest link to the university. Students rely on their supervisor for the outcome of their research and ultimately of their career; a good supervisor will assume a mentoring role and assist their student in securing professional opportunities. As this relationship is crucial to the student's success, a breakdown in this relationship is detrimental to the student (but has minimal consequences for the supervisor). This power imbalance means that the student is vulnerable to inappropriate behaviours from their supervisor, and in many cases will not report or address the behaviours due to the consequences this would have for their career.

The 2017 Australian Human Rights Commission survey queried inappropriate behaviour towards students from university staff. The survey found that one in ten postgraduate students

who were sexually harassed at university reported that the perpetrator was a tutor or lecturer from their university, and that postgraduate students were four times as likely as undergraduate students to be harassed by a colleague when working at the university (AHRC, 2017). However, exploring the prevalence of inappropriate supervisor behaviour specifically was a missed opportunity in the report into sexual assault and harassment in university communities. The report does not distinguish between a postgraduate research student suffering harassment from their supervisor, and a postgraduate coursework student being harassed by a lecturer who will have little bearing on their study and career outcomes in future. It is important to investigate the nature of the power relations involved in cases of harassment.

A first step to promoting a respectful supervision culture is communicating minimum standards and adopting policy which protects students. Last year, we worked with Universities Australia, the National Tertiary Education Union, and the Australian Council of Graduate Research to reach a unified position that there is a power imbalance in the supervision relationship, that therefore intimate relationships between supervisors and their students are never appropriate, and that university policies must contain protections for students against inappropriate supervision behaviour (UA, NTEU, CAPA, & ACGR 2018). The principles also specify that university codes of conduct should state that sexual assault and harassment are unacceptable and, in some cases, criminal; and that universities must have policies and procedures in place to protect those who report. We recommend that these principles be formally adopted at all universities, as well as institutes which host doctoral students. We also echo Science & Technology Australia's (2019) call for adoption of the Principles for Respectful Supervisory Relationships by all organisations in the STEM sector. Adoption of the principles must be followed by actions on this commitment, including by the implementation of policy relating to supervisory relationships.

Recommendation one: That all Australian universities and research institutes formally adopt the Principles for Respectful Supervisory Relationships.

Statements of principles and adoption of policy must be combined with primary prevention efforts to reduce incidences of sexual violence, as well as response mechanisms for when an incident does occur. CAPA made detailed recommendations to this effect in 2017 for the release of the AHRC survey results, and in our requests to universities one year later (Shaw 2017; CAPA 2018). In both reports, we called for university staff with supervision responsibilities to receive mandatory training on effective supervision and on ethical supervisory behaviour. This remains a concern, which is being addressed by the recent release of training videos and materials from the Australian Council of Graduate Research, for which CAPA joined the advisory group to assist in the development of these materials. These materials have been purchased for use by almost all Australian universities and can be used for both student and staff training. The training materials allow for students and staff to learn boundaries of appropriate supervision and will assist students in identifying when they are in inappropriate supervision situations. We encourage use of these materials in high-quality facilitated sessions at universities.

Recommendation two: That all Australian universities use the ACGR Respectful Research Training package for educating doctoral students and supervisors on appropriate supervision relationships.

Off-site harassment

The safety of public transport has recently gained media and university attention due to the horrific rape and murder of La Trobe University international student Aiiia Maasarwe near her home while travelling home from a night out. This incident is an extreme example of public transport being unsafe for women. It is the end-point on a spectrum of risk. Public transport safety on the way to and from university was examined in the 2017 AHRC report, which found that harassment on public transport was a common experience for university students.

Travel to and from university, as well as to external sites for fieldwork and placements, increases risks of students experiencing sexual violence. For many research students, data collection for their project occurs off-site as research facilities or field locations. Research students are also expected to attend conferences to present their research. This is an inherent aspect of the research student experience, however, due to the nature of social events (often involving alcohol) at conferences, this is an area of risk for postgraduate students. We are concerned that students and staff attending conferences may not consider reporting incidents occurring off-campus but in the course of their research or employment.

Universities must consider incidents that happen off-site in their communities as their responsibility. There must be clear reporting pathways and outcomes for reporting off-campus incidents, including where the parties involved may be from different institutions. It is not sufficient for universities to absolve themselves of responsibility by reducing or shifting liability for instances of workplace harassment that occur at conferences or at external facilities.

Recommendation three: That clear reporting processes on off-site harassment incidents be established for university students and staff.

Harassment experienced as teaching staff

Many HDR students support their studies by undertaking teaching associate work at their university or at another university. Approximately one third of postgraduate research students are also staff at universities, usually in teaching or research roles (Edwards, Bexley & Richardson 2011). In the course of their teaching duties, HDR students can unfortunately be exposed to harassment and other inappropriate behaviour, from the students they teach as well as from other staff members.

Job security in universities is poor, as has been repeatedly highlighted by the National Tertiary Education Union. The degree of insecure employment has been steadily increasing over the past fifteen years, with 43% of all university staff being employed as casuals, and a further 22% on limited fixed-term contracts (Kneist 2018). Research students working in universities are especially likely to be employed in casual positions and often do not know if they will be employed from one semester to the next. Furthermore, competition for jobs in the sector is such that it is easy to replace teaching and research staff. If a casual employee reports an incident, this may have a perceived or actual impact on the decision to renew their contract or give them more hours. In order to promote use of reporting procedures without fear of retribution, universities must end insecure employment practices.

Recommendation four: That universities must drastically reduce the use of casual and short-term staff in teaching and research positions, so that staff feel less fearful of reporting workplace harassment.

Conclusion and recommendations

In this submission, we focus on harassment of research students in the course of their research and employment at universities. Addressing sexual violence in research and teaching environments must be comprised of adequate policy and procedures, prevention and education efforts, and well-resourced response mechanisms. We have proposed several university policy changes which would facilitate greater uptake of reporting mechanisms.

We recognise that there has been progress in universities' handling of sexual violence since the 2017 AHRC report on sexual assault and harassment in universities. Any interventions must be evaluated for effectiveness. As we proceed towards the two-year anniversary of the AHRC report, we implore universities to undertake the follow-up survey as promised and include questions on students experiencing inappropriate supervisor behaviour, and students experiencing harassment and assault in their capacity as staff members. The follow-up survey must be conducted by a publicly accountable and independent body, such as the AHRC.

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