PhD students suffer from bullying supervisors

GUY HEALY

MIDWAY though her PhD, the anxious research student found herself on the receiving end of an unexpected — and unwelcome — level of interest from her supervisor, a departmental professor.

“[T]will help you all I can but you have to play ball,” he said before inviting her for a meal on Valentine’s Day at a very expensive restaurant, “as a treat for all your good work”.

“I need a way out,” she cries on her anonymous blog.

The exchange, recounted in a conference paper this week, is one of eight de-identified cases that University of Queensland researcher Suzanne Morris labelled “supervisory bullying”.

Dr Morris unearthed the examples by trawling the net using the key words “doctoral bullying supervisor”. She cut identifiers such as country, discipline and net address as she put together what she believes is the first report on how doctoral students experience bullying at the hands of their supervisors.

The power relationship with a supervisor was a big critical determinant of success for a graduate student, she said.

Postgraduates, estimated to perform 70 per cent of university research, say supervisors have the power to make or break them.

But Monash University’s deputy vice-chancellor Max King defended supervisors, saying his surveys showed 90 per cent of postgraduates to be satisfied, 5 per cent neutral and 5 per cent not satisfied.

“Being a supervisor is a bit like being a parent and parents aren’t always the best parents,” Professor King said.

He said some students could misread as bullying what was intended as constructive criticism or “a rev up” for a poorly performing student.

Meanwhile, the federal innovation department is studying a worrying decline in higher degree starts as part of its emerging research workforce strategy.

That paper was prepared for the department by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations after a research students’ workshop exposed bullying and other issues.

“Student comments suggest that supervisors were directly responsible for both the very best and the very worst of what the research training experience has to offer,” it says.

CAPA president Tammi Jonas told the HES bullying could often stem from the misguided efforts of some academics to earn publication points from their students’ research, especially in the sciences.

“It’s not rife; but we have clear examples that it’s a regular occurrence on campus, if not a common one; but [it’s] devastating for the student involved,” she said.

Bond University anti-bullying campaigner Amy Kenworthy said there was a belief the doctoral process had to be exceptionally difficult to produce high-quality academics. “That, coupled with the power-dependency issue, is like putting gasoline and fire together,” Professor Kenworthy said.

Whistleblowers Australia vice-president Brian Martin estimated “a significant proportion of students [would be] experiencing bullying at any one time and a larger proportion at some time during their studies”.

“Even if the figure is 5 per cent, it’s a lot of people and a lot of damage done,” he said.