Some PhD and supervisor relationships are not perfect. And there might be incidences of bullying. But let’s get some perspective, writes Joseph Gora.

Do I detect the whiff of hysteria in relation to the issue of bullying in higher education? Yes and no is the answer, since references to bullying – rather like the monkey and typewriter – do occasionally hit the mark. No one really knows how much bullying goes on, mainly because managers and supervisors can easily hide behind the barricades of university policy manuals.

Such ghastly matters aside, I would like to take issue with an article recently cobbled together with wafer-thin “evidence” in The Australian. In the article, the journalist begins his “analysis” with the harrowing blog from a female PhD student who recounted how her male supervisor said: “I’ll help you all I can, but you have to play ball”.

This was followed by an invitation to go to an expensive restaurant on Valentine’s Day “as a treat for all your good work”. The desperate blogger was clearly distressed. The information was sourced from a certain Dr Suzanne Morris, a researcher from the University of Queensland, who got most of her data by trawling the internet. (After much searching, I found that Dr Morris is in fact an education officer in the School of Biological Sciences at UQ. She has published some interesting articles on topics like the lateral buds of the chickpea and the crop drying conditions on pyrethrins content.

Morris apparently presented her findings to a conference in which she discussed several examples of supervisory bullying culled from the blogosphere. The Australian quoted Morris’s view that: “The power relationship with a supervisor was a big critical determinant of success for a graduate student”, although this point escapes elaboration. Lurching on, the article asserts (without providing detailed evidence) that: “Postgraduates, estimated to perform 70 per cent of university research, say supervisors have the power to make or break them”.

Having staked the sensationalist ground, the article proceeded to introduce some semblance of balance by quoting Monash University’s deputy vice-chancellor, Max King, who asserted that most of the postgraduates surveyed at his university were satisfied with their supervisors. The DVC did admit, however, that some supervisors might seek to encourage their students as a sort of “rev up”. Next, the article catapulted to a study by the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations which concluded that there was a drop-off in postgraduate starts. This attempt to link together two variables is a long shot, sneaky even, but the journalist goes for it...
consider the idea of sitting with a student over a cup of coffee and chatting about the epistemological underpinnings of a thesis a bit anachronistic. Most supervisors hope that their charges are entirely self-directed and can pump out clean copy chapters that require little or no input. The even greater hope is that three years down the track, the submitted tome receives a university award for which the supervisor can take full credit.

I was one of those poor naive suckers who read every single line of a student's early drafts, talked long and hard about the subject matter and offered regular words of encouragement. All this took what often felt like an eternity. I was approached by several students who, dissatisfied with the no-show of their supervisors, asked if I would take on the role.

At this point, enter Dr Gora on his high horse: those supervisors who take on students simply to advance their careers without providing the necessary input are self-serving tossers! Thankfully, they remain a minority. There are plenty of saints around who give their all to help students through the torture of a PhD, often working with them during evenings and at weekends. I know of one decent fellow, now a professor of education at one of our more esteemed factories, who every other Saturday would line up his students at his home and administer his advice, rather like a doctor to a patient. This conveyor belt approach, combined with boundless energy, focused determination and good humour, helped many a student through the thicket of PhD completion.

On the second issue, relationships between student and supervisor; well, these vary enormously depending on what is going on in their respective lives. From the supervisor's perspective, the problem is that scarcity of time, multiple demands and the culture of competition mean that relationships with all students suffer.

But if you really want to achieve quality supervision which involves equitable dialogue, mutual respect and the sheer joy of learning, then consider how you can overcome the crass instrumentalism of today's university system. Consider for instance a report recently published by the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne and the Griffith Institute for Higher Education. The report makes for heartbreaking...
reading. It mourns the passing of a rich and fulfilling experience for students, replaced by an arid system that offers little or no meaningful contact between students (most of whom work long hours to make ends meet), and campuses that resemble apolitical cultural deserts. Lecturers are reduced to process facilitators with little space for the verve, creativity, activism and sense of shared curiosity that should constitute the educational experience.

It's the cultural system, stupid!

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